



STORY BY
Rhythm Aida
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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*





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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke
This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!



“The Piggy Duke was intelligent, strong, kindhearted, and sadly, too stubborn for his own good. From another perspective, the story of Shuya Marionette can be interpreted as his tragedy.”

—Director of Shuya Marionette

Prologue: I Always Overdo It

“Ohoink... Ohooooink!!!” I howled with effort.

Everyone has their shortcomings, ones that manifest in all kinds of ways. For example, some people have character flaws like selfishness, a foul mouth, or violent tendencies. Others might have superficial flaws, such as being as overweight as an orc. With that in mind...

What would the former Prodigy of Wind’s shortcoming be?

I took a deep breath. “Ohoooi... Ohooooink!”

Heh heh, I suppose it’d be my habit of overdoing it!

When I was a kid, I wanted so badly to be with the girl I liked that I evolved into the blackhearted Piggy Duke... Actually, I guess it’s more accurate to say that I devolved.

Thinking back now, there were so many other better options out there. Truthfully speaking, I just couldn’t stand the idea of walking down the predestined path of a House Denning heir, and that drove me to take the most drastic course of action. But in hindsight, well... Playing the villain wasn’t exactly my brightest idea.

Many, many things have happened since then, both good and bad. Now I get to live my best life at Kirsch. At the very least, I managed to accomplish my biggest goal to stay together with Charlotte, so I’d call that a win.

I grunted yet again, huffing and puffing from the exertion. “Oi... Ohooooink!”

Speaking of overdoing it, take what I’m doing right now, for example. Do you hear these bellows of agony? Sounds like an orc on its deathbed, doesn’t it? Yeah, that’s me. Of course it’s me! Who else could it be?

You might be thinking, “An orc? At this point, you’re a wayyyy more horrendous monster than that.” But let’s chill with those comments, because yes, it’s me.

“Ohoink... Ohooooink!”

I was doing dead lifts with metal barbells I’d made with earth magic. Some of the students passing by acted as if they’d just seen a ghost, but I ignored them.

Oh, oops. My custom-made weights slipped from my grasp and crashed into the ground, leaving a large dent in their wake. I should’ve seen that coming. Lifting something that weighs as much as I do sure is tough. But I finally reached my goal!

I collapsed onto the chilly ground, brimming with a sense of

accomplishment. The dazzling sun blinded me as I gazed up into the sky not a moment later, and I fell into a thoughtful silence. *One month has passed since that day...the day I fought the witch and completely and utterly lost.*

And as you might have guessed, ever since that day, I've been single-mindedly devoting every waking moment to whipping my body into shape.

I heard one student's hushed whisper. "Look, our resident Mister Cyclops is here. One minute he's putting on weight, and then the next he turns around and trims down. That guy's rushing through his life like there's no tomorrow."

"Hey, don't point at him," another warned. "Did you already forget what happened to the guy who mocked that place a while ago? Called it filthy? He couldn't stomach food for *days!*"

I've come to a conclusion. You see, even if I have this so-called knowledge from the anime, in the end, I can't predict everyone's behavior. Not even in my wildest dreams did I ever foresee the Dream Dealer Witch, one of the Three Musketeers, joining the fray. And this is me we're talking about!

"Look at the Piggy Duke's bod. Jeez, I wouldn't question it if he said he was a mercenary from somewhere. He's practically a miniature ogre."

"You know, I think he used to be more approachable before. He isn't like, big and towering or anything now, but just standing near him feels intimidating... Oh, he got up. Yikes, he's looking our way! Run!"

Ever since the day I woke up with the knowledge of the anime, I always ended up overthinking things. Because of that, I'd spent all my time lately tempering my body so that my anxiety wouldn't run wild. And I had incredible results to show for it too.

I'd obtained a physique that would send people reeling on sight—that much was obvious based on the reactions from the other students earlier. I didn't mind them much, though, because after my life-and-death game of tag with that witch, I realized something—that when push comes to shove and I'm batting above my league, the only thing I can rely on is my own body. Fate could—and probably would—betray me, as was its wont, but my body wouldn't ever let me down.

"Say, Miha. Weren't you just saying a little bit ago that you were into muscular guys?" one girl whispered. "What about him?"

"Oh, that body is too much. I can still clearly picture how Lord Denning looked before. I'm honestly not sure how to react to this new figure because of that. I think he was more charming and cute back when people called him an orc."

The first girl hesitated. "Wait, how are orcs *cute*?"

As a result of staying firm to an excessively fierce weight-loss regime—well, more like a muscle-building regime—before I knew it, nobody talked to me at school anymore. *There used to be quite a lot of people who'd come up to me and ask me for magic tutoring before all this went down, you know. But now, well... Honestly, this is nothing new.*

Next thing I knew, the day had flown by, and I realized that I'd gone the whole day without speaking to a single soul.

"Look, it's You-Know-Who. Lord Cyclops. He's staring off into the distance... I wonder what's on his mind," one girl whispered.

"Not sure. My guess is that he's thinking about muscles, but who knows...?"

Even such a stoic man needed someone to talk to regularly to maintain his mental health. And who was the number one contender for company to chat with every day?

Do you even have to ask? It's Charlotte, of course.

A girl giggled nearby, then said, "Char, that's ridiculous! Hey, have you done your homework yet?"

Huh? Huhuh? Well, would you look at that! I'd spotted Charlotte, my dearest friend. She looked deep in conversation with the girl strolling through campus beside her, who I could only guess was her friend. The difference between them and me is like night and day... Here I am, sitting on a stack of clay drainage pipes, glaring at everyone. What a thug.

"Are you for *reeeal*? You've studied that far ahead? You're such a good student, Char. I can't compare at all!" the girl whined. "Since you've finished already, let me have a look at the assignment! Pretty please?"

News of our return to Kirsch has to have reached my father and the rest of my family by now. Yet House Denning hasn't moved at all to force us back home. That she-wolf Mallow is just that influential in our household. It doesn't even stop there! She even managed to convince them to allow Charlotte to take magic lessons. I cannot overstate how amazing that woman is.

The girl talking to Charlotte began fawning over her. "Listen, Char, you're improving in leaps and bounds! In the few years after I awoke my magic, I couldn't do anything with it. But look at you! You should have more confidence in yourself! You're terrific!"

Hmm, by now, it's been about a month since the empire withdrew their troops from the battlefield. Nowadays, nobody fears the possibility of an upcoming war.

As I sat, I overheard other students chatting around me as well.

"...Hey. When do you think he'll come back? Professor Loco Moco,

I mean.”

“Oh, him? We all thought he was back for good, but then he vanished with the headmaster and Professor Yugiri... Well, knowing the professor, he’s probably off somewhere having fun or something,” someone said with a shrug.

“I wonder what souvenirs he’ll bring back this time,” another kid chimed in.

“Forget about that; have you guys heard the news? Word on the street is, Professor Yugiri was secretly scouting talented people for Princess Carina’s future Guardian Knight during her time at Kirsch.”

“They usually pick the Guardian Knight from the ranks of the Royal Knights, though. I mean, if you’ve got incomparable skills like Denning does, they’d probably make an exception, but otherwise? Nah.”

Professor Yugiri was a Royal Knight who’d taken up a job as a professor at Kirsch. There’d been a lot of speculation about why she came to Kirsch in the first place—the theories ranged from looking for potential Royal Knight candidates among the students to a mental health vacation. But no one learned the truth about her presence until the very end, and by that point, Professor Yugiri had already received her orders to return to the Royal Knights. Had everything gone according to plan, Professor Loco Moco would’ve returned to Kirsch in her place.

But then *that* incident happened. I didn’t even want to think about it. Because of everything that went down, the headmaster had rushed towards the capital with Professor Yugiri and even Professor Loco Moco in tow, despite the latter having only just settled into his new position.

“Things are pretty dull without Professor Loco Moco around. I liked those half-hearted lessons of his...”

It should’ve come as no surprise, then, that the absence of the most popular professor at school left much of the student body feeling dejected.

“I know this is probably beating a dead horse, but listen to this! So, Tully went into the forest to see the fallen meteorite, and apparently there’s nothing recognizable left of the place. It’s like the apocalypse happened there. Completely wrecked, according to Tully...”

People celebrated the meteorite in the forest as a monument, one celebrating the new future that awaited this world. It marked Dustour’s withdrawal from Daryth and the beginning of peace that would last centuries. The Age of Dawn, they called it. Well, that’s what people said, anyway, but in truth, that thing had been made manifest by a warrior from the enemy nation.

The powers that be, including the staff at Kirsch, swept the Dream Dealer Witch's rampage completely under the rug, leaving not a single trace behind.

"I planned on joining the army, but what should I do now that it's not really needed? Hmm..."

"Yeah, it's probably about time that we start thinking about that seriously. Even if I went back home after graduation, my bro would just use me as his gofer."

A laid-back, carefree atmosphere hung over the school despite such a close brush with disaster. That wasn't such a bad thing, though. Ignorance is bliss, after all, and the presence of an agent of Dustour in the forest was a truth best left untold to the masses.

Now, if only I could erase Professor Yugiri's memories of Charlotte, then everything would be perfect. The professor did promise that she wouldn't cause us any trouble, perhaps out of gratitude to us for saving her life, but still... Charlotte was my retainer hailing from Huzak, a country renowned for its destruction at the hands of monsters.

"Huh," Charlotte's friend muttered. "A retainer of the great House Denning has to shoulder some pretty high expectations in terms of skill, huh? That sure sounds tough, Char."

Oh? Are Charlotte and her buddy heading to their next class already? I leaped down from the pipes and approached them with casual, nonchalant snorts.

Lately, Charlotte didn't accompany me during my workouts. I get that she had classes now and was busy revising notes and preparing ahead of time. Charlotte never had the education that nobles like me received, so she must've been working her head off. Of course she inevitably wouldn't have as much time to spend with me, but...

I called out to her. "Hey, Charlo—"

"Ah, Char! Lord Denning is calling for you... H-Huh?! Where are you going, Char?! Class doesn't start for a little while yet! What? What preparations?!"

And yet...and yet... I sniffled inwardly. That the same young woman who'd served for ages as the blackhearted Piggy Duke's retainer, not even batting an eye at the very presence that supposedly scared crying children into silence, would end up fleeing in a cloud of dust, just like this...

"Ah, Lord Denning, my deepest apologies!" Charlotte's friend bowed her head apologetically in my direction. "We're in a bit of a hurry!"

I gave her an exaggerated, pompous nod, as if Charlotte's behavior hadn't affected me at all, but on the inside, I nursed an utterly broken heart. *But hey, I tried to convince myself, Charlotte's responsible, so she probably doesn't ever want to be late to class. What an earnest student. I'm*

so proud of her.

“A hardworking student is an admirable one, oink,” I muttered slowly.

All right, knock it off with the denial already and think, Slowe. What the heck was that just now? I mean, I’m used to people reacting in such a depressing way towards me by now. But Charlotte’s always stayed firmly on my side, even during my darkest moments. And she definitely just fled at the mere sight of me.

I stifled a sigh. “I bet she’s doing this because of what happened that day, huh? I’m not imagining it, right? She’s definitely doing it on purpose.”

It’d all started the day that the musketeer had taken Charlotte hostage. We drove back the witch with the help of the Great Spirit of Darkness, and while we managed to defend the shaky peace of the continent...

My life had been smashed into pieces because Charlotte was *avoiding me*.

There was a long stretch of dejected silence before I let out a disconcerted oink. The sad thing was, I could come up with several reasons that could explain her behavior. *I’m starting to suspect it’s because I dragged her into too much danger... Did she realize that as long as she’s by my side, these life-threatening situations won’t stop? Or is she just completely fed up with me?*

A voice broke through my spiraling thoughts. “Hey. Whatcha doin’? Ya look like the world’s about ta end, ya know.”

The end of the world. This guy’s right. That describes it perfectly. To me, Charlotte avoiding me isn’t much different from the apocalypse, and—

“Wait...” I slowly turned around. “Was that...?”

“Yep! I’m back, Denning!”

Standing behind me, arms crossed and the very picture of passion as ever, was none other than Professor Loco Moco, the former Royal Knight who’d gone to the capital alongside the headmaster and Professor Yugiri.

Chapter 1: Am I a Celebrity Now?

“Ya look downright awful, Denning.”

It's a little hard to explain my relationship with this professor. You see, in general, teachers or teacher-esque characters tend to serve as guides to the protagonist in the anime. But I'm stronger than him, so we're closer to comrades now than anything. But anyhow, there's one thing I'm sure of... Just like in the anime, I can definitely rely on him, and I'd actually been more anxious for his return than anyone else's. In fact, I am so peeved right now because he should have been back way sooner!

“Professor Loco Moco! When did you get back from the capital?!”

“Just now. And so here I was, mindin’ my own business and sneakin’ around the school when I saw ya standing here lookin’ all miserable. But wow, Denning, look at ya. Sayin’ that ya’ve slimmed down would be the understatement of the century. Ya know, I’m actually speechless with how overboard ya went on the whole workin’ out thing.”

I clenched my jaw. “Then I suppose I owe you a lifetime of gratitude for making me so worried that I couldn’t help but work out to burn off some steam,” I said, sarcasm dripping from my voice.

“Worried?” He cocked an eyebrow in disbelief. “Hold up, have ya really been that worried this whole time?”

“Of course I have. One of the Three Musketeers attacked me directly, and then I was abandoned here at Kirsch before I had the chance to see things to the end... It was torture.”

The professor sighed. “So, yer still hung up on the fact that we didn’t bring ya along to the capital.”

The professor acted like it was nothing, but to me, that incident—no, that crisis—threatened to ruin everything I’d done up to this point. Thinking back on it now, I should have done whatever it took to join them in the capital. Because I’d stayed on campus, they’d left me completely in the dark, and I took out my frustrations on my own body.

I changed the topic in hopes that maybe putting some of the professor’s fears to rest would loosen his tongue. “You don’t have to worry about things on Kirsch’s front. Everyone here has already forgotten all about it.”

“Yer right, that does seem to be the case. They say the meteorite in the forest’s a monument celebrating the beginning of a new age,

aye? Good for them, I guess.”

“You teachers were the ones who twisted the story that way, though,” I reminded him.

The story of the meteorite coincidentally falling in the forest was a complete hoax. After the Great Spirit of Darkness helped me chase off the witch, the professors had immediately rushed over from campus. Every last one of them had been left wide-eyed with shock at the disastrous scene they found.

Naturally, trying to deceive the teachers was nigh impossible. I gave them my testimony on everything that’d happened, though my revealing of the Great Spirit of Darkness’s identity sent them into a frenzy. The Great Spirit apparently had no intention of hiding who she was, so anyone with enough talent could glean her terrifying existence with a single glance. So I thought that it was better for me to explain instead of letting the Great Spirit stir the pot by saying whatever she pleased.

“Anyway, Professor Loco Moco,” I said, “don’t you think it was cruel of you to give me the silent treatment for an entire month? Thanks to that, my body transformed into *this*”—I gestured down at myself—“due to all the anxiety and stress.”

“If that’s the case, shouldn’t ya be thankin’ me instead? Mages nowadays tend to rely completely on their spells and neglect their physique. Takin’ an opportunity to train yerself so thoroughly is a good thing.”

“So, did you come back alone, Professor?” I asked slowly.

“The old coot said he’s still got stuff to do at the capital, so yeah, I’m here alone.”

“Alone...”

“Actually, Denning, ya really shouldn’t ask any more questions. Don’t go around pokin’ yer nose into this stuff.”

“Professor, may I remind you that I was directly implicated?”

“I’m sayin’ this for yer own good.”

I hesitated. “Is the Great Spirit of Darkness still in the capital?”

The professor held his tongue, making it very clear he had no intention of divulging any more information. *I didn’t really think I could wrestle the info out of him either. I know they left me behind because they wanted to put some distance between me and this incident.*

I did feel that this incident had unprecedented implications, so I’m not surprised they’re trying to keep me out of it. If I put even a toe into it without thinking, I’d probably be stuck as a pawn in this stupid conflict until it’s over. That’s how ridiculously large its scope is.

The professor grumbled, “Ugh, yer so annoying. Maybe I shouldn’t have talked to ya after all.”

“You should have just brought me along to the capital in the first

place, then.”

“Ye’ve already heard it all from the old coot. The Great Spirit of Darkness clearly has a strong interest in ya, and that’s the problem. I’m sure ya know that she’s famous for scoutin’ out talented mages and bringin’ them back to the empire. We’ve lost countless Daryth mages who ended up defectin’ to the north because of their fascination with the Great Spirit of Darkness.”

I know that. Nanatrij is a collector through and through. Her room is stuffed to the brim with extremely rare and valuable items. Her “collections” include humans as well, and all the mages who catch her eye are the best of the best. I heard she even took Headmaster Morozov in as her disciple when he was young and trained him in Dustour. It was Shuya and the Guardian Sword of Light she obsessed over in the anime, if I remember correctly.

“But the current situation is dire enough for us to ignore something like that,” I argued. “One of the most powerful military assets of the empire has brainwashed one of our Royal Knights.”

The professor glanced around, flustered. “Shush and watch yer mouth. Like I said, yer walkin’ into forbidden territory if ya head any further. And don’t keep bringin’ up things from the past. We absolutely shoulda contacted ya before now, sure, but think about what we’re dealin’ with here. Even leavin’ a paper trail was a risk.”

He continued on, not leaving me any room to respond to that. “Look around us. Everyone here is baskin’ in the peace we have. The fact that I was able to come back means that things have calmed down to a certain extent. So don’t ya worry. I can at least promise ya that the witch hasn’t done anythin’ since then. Even if she does, we’ve taken flawless countermeasures. That hag won’t be able to do a single thing.”

Asking me not to worry is a tall order. The enemy, one of the infamous Three Musketeers, is serious about starting a war. How could the professor be so calm? Is it because Nanatrij has agreed to cooperate fully in this regard? I mean, yeah, she is the one who decides how the Dustour Empire moves, so if she wishes for a truce, the empire will have no choice but to stay still. Is he implying that we shouldn’t worry about a lone warrior like the witch?

“Lettin’ your thoughts run all over the place will get ya nowhere. Those chaps in the capital are doing somethin’ about it. So just keep on keepin’ outta it for yer own good, all right?”

“For my own good?”

“Even you, Denning, probably have secrets that ya don’t want people pokin’ their noses into. Am I right?” Professor Loco Moco bid me a nonchalant farewell in his usual drawl before turning on his heel and walking away. “See ya.”

I stared at his back, rooted to the spot.



I couldn't find any words to say, but my thoughts ran wild. *Secrets I don't want others to know about? There's obviously more to that... I happen to know of one thing that he might be referring to—Charlotte's true identity.*

"No way, right?" I muttered to myself.

On that fateful night, Professor Yugiri had discovered who Charlotte was. The Great Spirit of Wind's incessant screaming and squawking at the Great Spirit of Darkness was a dead giveaway, and the final nail in the proverbial coffin.

"Hey! I just saw Professor Loco Moco!" someone shouted.

"Oh yeah, he ended up going to the capital with Professor Yugiri, didn't he? Let's go talk to him!" another said excitedly.

I ignored them and focused on my train of thought. *But I talked with Charlotte, and we both came to the conclusion that blindly worrying about it would be pointless. Sometimes it's important to go with the flow. That's what I told Charlotte so that she wouldn't panic, anyway, but it's not completely untrue.*

Besides, Professor Yugiri promised that she wouldn't cause us any harm. I don't know how much I can trust her, but she owes us a life debt. I wonder how much she has reported to the queen and her court...

I sighed. "Well, I'd better brace myself for the worst-case scenario just to be safe."

At a time like this...there is only one thing I should do.

"Oh... Ohoooink!"

Let me be clear: I am not howling. Lifting the barbell takes everything I've got, that's all. I have put in all this effort to improve my endurance so that I never, ever make the same mistake that left me completely drained by the end of that game of tag.

"Ohoooooink!" This time, I grunted longer and louder.

It's good to build muscles. Muscles have never let me down.

Everything is fine. Nanatrij is on our side as well, and the many fierce warriors in the royal capital have the current Guardian Knight, Sir Delfrey, leading the charge. We even have the Great Spirit of Light, Lectrikuhl, so a lone witch of the empire should be a piece of cake.

"Hold up, Alicia!" a familiar voice yelled.

"Oink..." I heaved, my snorts slowly turning confused. "Oin... Oink?"

"Why has my debt grown?! Something's definitely not right here! What kind of crappy calculations did you do to cause it to increase so much?!"

While I was over here worrying about the fate of the world, this familiar *someone* sounded downright blissfully ignorant by comparison. I kept doing my dead lifts even as I looked over to the source, and I spotted a pair coming my way. *Oh, hey. Straightening all the way up while lifting the barbell is a pretty good exercise too. I'll note that.*

"Shuya!" the other half of the pair snapped. "You birdbrain, have you already forgotten how much money I wasted because I ended up joining you on that stupid trip?! Of *course* the cost for all of that's included as well!"

"But we planned that trip together, and I had your permission! I clearly remember that you were itching to leave before we left too!"

"Do you need your eyes checked?! I only went along because I was worried about you, that's all!"

"Either way, I could never earn this much! It's impossible!"

Ah yes, the bickering old couple never changes, huh? I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

It seemed that Alicia had pulled off an escape from her imprisonment in Cirquista at the hands of the king, managing to leave her home country once more. Now, she was enjoying the peak of her youth at school.

"Oh, whatever. Call it impossible all you want, but *you owe me this money!* Surely that fortune-telling of yours could earn you something! You used to earn a decent amount with that crystal ball, so why did you quit?! Reopen your shop immediately!"

"That crystal ball turned out to be a cursed magical artifact! I heard the voice say that it would never let me off the hook if I threw it away, so I still have it, but I won't actually use it for telling fortunes anymore!"

I heard that Shuya doesn't talk to himself anymore. He could probably lead a peaceful, normal life from here on out. Personally, I would've preferred it if he threw away that crystal ball, but that's probably asking too much. Nobody knows how the Great Spirit Eldred sleeping inside the crystal ball would react if pushed that far.

"At any rate! Pay me back by the end of this month, Shuya! I'd tolerate even just a tenth of the total sum!"

"I *told* you it's one hundred percent impossible!"

I'm so jealous of these two right now. Charlotte's avoiding me... Still, I'm curious what's going to happen to these two in the future. In the anime, they grew closer because of the war with the empire. If things stay peaceful, will they still become a couple?

My irritation spiked, causing my arms still lifting the barbell to twitch and fall. *How dare they flaunt their lovey-doveyness right in front of me...! Why the heck should I worry about their future?! I already have*

my hands full, thank you very much!

“Even if you can’t afford to return it all at once, Shuya, paying it back little by little is fine. But you *must* pay me back! Promise me! Ah, right! Make sure to put it in writing! A verbal contract is insecure!”

Insecure, huh...? I thought wryly. Charlotte’s likely way, way more insecure over her cover being blown than I am. If her identity becomes public knowledge, there’s the very real possibility of people putting her on a pedestal and celebrating the revival of Huzak royalty. Charlotte doesn’t want anything to do with that kind of thing, though.

I felt a light bulb go off in my head. “That’s it!”

I’d been so completely invested in muscle building that, without realizing it, I’d left Charlotte to deal with the gravity of her situation all on her own. I could take out my stress by working out, but Charlotte...didn’t have anything like that.

“I can’t let this go on, oink,” I declared.

Charlotte’s anxiety must be crushing her right at this very moment. How could I have been so oblivious to her feelings?! I kicked myself for being so careless. Oh spirits, what a terrible sin I have committed! I played the part of the blackhearted Piggy Duke for such a long time so that I can be with her at moments like this, didn’t I?!

I’m so sorry, Charlotte! I’ll head there right away!

Everyone, you remember what happened this morning, right? Yes, I’m talking about the incident when I swear Charlotte’s eyes met mine but she still pretended she didn’t see me.

At this point, I’m not just speculating; I’m absolutely certain. Up until now, I’ve only suspected it to be the case, but I’ve truly evolved even further from the earnest Piggy Duke into the dazzling, charming Piggy Duke! I can do this!

I made a beeline for the female dorms, where Charlotte lived. *I’ll go and see the truth for myself.*

On my way, I heard girls around me whispering.

“H-Hey, that’s Lord Denning. Look at him... I used to think that members of House Denning all looked ambitious and aggressive, but...well... That doesn’t really describe Lord Denning...”

“To think that he was once an orc in human flesh... It all feels like a fever dream or something.”

“He’s so burly and manly compared to before. I *do* think that he might have gone a tad too far, though... But to be honest, I think it fits what I know about him.”

A chubby guy with initiative—that’s who I am now. I’m not the earnest Piggy Duke, but the Piggy Duke who charges in head-on.

Still, I must say that I feel so awkward and out of place here at the female dorms... Should I get someone to go fetch Charlotte for me?

I was about to ask a girl lounging around apparently doing nothing when she beat me to the punch. "Um... Shall I call Char here for you?"

I'll get nowhere if I just stand around. With that in mind, I gave the girl a great big nod. "Oink!"

Charlotte came out in a flash. "M-Master Slowe! Pardon me, but you really shouldn't be here!"

"What's the problem with me coming here?"

"That's not what I meant at all, but, um..." Charlotte groaned. "Ugh, just come over here!"

I let Charlotte usher me away from the area. Everyone stared at us with curiosity burning in their eyes, but such things no longer bothered me. *I'm the Charging Piggy Duke, after all.*

"Charlotte, you've been avoiding me, haven't you? You completely ignored me this morning."

"This morning was...well... How do I put this... Um, I wasn't trying to ignore you or anything, but... More importantly, please don't just show up to the girls' dorm again! When you're around, Master Slowe, you give everyone a nasty shock!"

"What did you just say? You make me sound like a monster... True, I might have been an orc among humans in the past, but I'd like to think I've become a lot more prim and proper lately."

"Th-That's not what I'm trying to say at all! I mean, this isn't a place where a grand and noble person like you should lower yourself to come..."

"I guess you do have a point there. Noble students wouldn't normally come around here, but still..." I muttered slowly.

"It's improper! Master Slowe, please be more aware of the impression people have of you!"

"Huh?" My eyes widened. "What did I do this time?"

Nothing came to mind. I couldn't remember picking on anybody, nor had I secretly defeated a baddie sneaking around school. I was pretty sure that I had been living as the good old ordinary Mister Denning.

"N-No way... Master Slowe, y-you... You're still oblivious after all the ridiculous things you've done?"

Charlotte face-palmed, but I really, truly didn't know what she was getting at. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I've only been an average Joe recently, don't you think?"

"I'll be blunt, then... Master Slowe! How long are you planning to continue doing dead-lift workouts while making those weird grunts of yours?!"

"Huh? What do my workouts have to do with anything?"

“On your days off, you weight lift and weight lift and weight lift the whole day away in the spot behind the school building! Do you know what people call the place you chose as your workout area? They call it the slaughterhouse of Mercenary Slowe Denning, and they say that you will beat anyone who dares to go inside to a pulp!”

“Th-That’s a misunderstanding, Charlotte. You see, someone tried to steal my equipment. I only scolded them a little bit so that they wouldn’t ever do such evil deeds again, and—”

Yeah, true, that has happened a few times. I made my equipment out of magic. Some guy tried to steal it, thinking he could make a hefty sum if he sold it to the right enthusiast or whatever. So I set a trap and that moron got caught in it. That’s all.

“And I’m trying to say that you went too far! Master Slowe, you’re so, you know, *extreme*! Sure, a lot of things have happened since you declared that you’d trim down, but you didn’t have to go *this* far!”

“You think so, oink?”

“Don’t ‘oink’ me! Please don’t joke around! You’ve even started being careful about your diet, unlike before. You only eat things that are nutritious now!”

“Of course I’m watching my diet. I’m doing my best to learn, after all.”

Even if food is a matter of life and death to me, I don’t ever want to get fat again! In fact, I haven’t just opened my eyes to the marvels of weight loss and muscle building; I’ve also learned the wonders of self-management. My gym feels more like boot camp than an exercise facility because of the strict standards I hold myself to now. The atmosphere in there probably freaks the other students out.

“And! One more thing!”

“What’s that?”

“You may have turned into a muscle-head, but nothing can change the fact that you’ve become a very respectable person! That’s why, well... You’ve become entirely independent nowadays, and...”

“And...?” I prompted her.

“And you no longer need someone useless like me around, do you, Master Slowe?!” she yelled. “You don’t need *me*! You don’t need a retainer anymore!”

Leaving that echoing in my ears, Charlotte fled towards the dorms.



I returned to my gym and reflected on what Charlotte had said to me.

“Charlotte was pretty upset...”

As I lifted an even larger barbell than before, I thought back on

our conversation. *She said I'm independent now. True, I've been trying harder than necessary lately because I want to impress her with how much I've improved. Thanks to all my efforts, even Alicia mentioned that I'm, and I quote, "not too bad nowadays." For Alicia of all people to say such a thing is a compliment of the highest order.*

"Does Charlotte really think I don't need or want her around because I'm independent now? If that's what she's worried about, it's not true at all..." I mumbled to myself.

I'd even started preparing my own food for the sake of my diet, though it wasn't anything fancy. I made chicken dishes to snack on during my breaks between workouts, choosing only things that would aid my physique.

Now, I know that everyone calls my gym a slaughterhouse, but let's ignore that for the moment. She's right... I think I really haven't needed Charlotte's care recently.

"But well, that's because..." A while ago, I told Charlotte that I wanted to tell her something once I trimmed down. Basically, um, something like a confession, so, you know... Charlotte seemed quite moved at the time. After the witch incident, that conversation has kind of been left to gather dust, but I haven't forgotten about it at all.

"Huh, if I look at it that way, maybe I am distancing myself from Charlotte."

Just like Charlotte said, I was slowly letting go of her hand, little by little.

"Professor Loco Moco! Please tell us which students Professor Yugiri considered promising!" one student shouted.

Due to Professor Loco Moco's return, today's Practical Magic class had an alarming attendance rate. Even all of the regular hooky players showed up. To make matters worse, someone had asked whether Professor Yugiri had truly been scouting potential Royal Knight recruits. The professor had to go and put his foot in his mouth with his response of, "Why do ya know *that*?" After that, of course, chaos broke loose over the class. Everyone swarmed the professor, eagerly asking about who Professor Yugiri had chosen.

I, for one, didn't care about any of this approval stuff. "Leaving the nest and learning to stand on my own, huh?" I muttered.

Charlotte's words weighed heavily on me, and while she hadn't been wrong, that wasn't the only reason I had started to spend less time with her. Ever since Charlotte had received permission to attend classes, I hadn't wanted her to take time out to look after me. I didn't want to force her into the "retainer" box at all. If she had things she wanted to do, she had the right to do them. If she had things she wanted to learn, I wanted her to learn as much as she could.

A voice came from behind me. "What's wrong, Lord Denning? That was a huge sigh. That's pretty much the norm for you, though. And why were you peeking in my direction so candidly earlier?"

My eyes lit up, and I spun around. "M-My lord and savior has arrived!"

"Lord Denning... What did you just call me?"

"Uh, never mind. It's nothing of concern, Tina."

She's here! She's finally here! The commoner girl who would always point me in the right direction whenever I hit a brick wall! *No, I should call her a goddess and my holy savior.* She was a bubbly first-year who would brighten every room she entered, and despite the fact that I was one year her senior, I was extremely indebted to her.

I won't exactly call her a friend; I think I could go so far as to call her my greatest life consultant. There's actually a story behind that.

When the stress was eating away at me because I couldn't go to the capital with the headmaster and company, she guided me and helped me see the light. Yep, you guessed it—it was Tina who told me how exercise could be a great stress relief, putting me on the path of muscle building.

"Wow, Lord Denning, your body looks like it's been through the wringer. Up close, you almost look like a stranger," Tina commented before cutting to the chase. "So, what's up?"

"Hey, Tina, do you think I'm an independent person right now?"

"I-Independent? Th-This is rather sudden."

Among all my associates, Tina was the toughest one. She constantly fought tooth and nail for her place in this school. On the night of the battle with the witch, there had been a festival at school. It was at this festival that this girl had apparently managed to rip off enough money to pay for an entire year's worth of tuition!

I wondered what I looked like in Tina's eyes. *She probably sees me as someone who lives life on easy mode since I have House Denning backing me up.*

Tina thought for a while, then she gave her reply. "Um... I think you've been pretty self-sufficient and independent lately, Lord Denning. I mean, you look like you'd even survive being abandoned on an uninhabited island or something."

"Y-You think so?"

"Yes! Actually, I'd say you've gone much further than just being independent," Tina declared.

Huh. I'm surprised; she rated me a lot higher than I thought.

Tina continued, "That's not all! You're practically glowing lately with how amazing you are."

"G-Glowing? Okay, now you're just pulling my leg." *I'm the furthest thing you can get from dazzling. I do think that I've gotten fit, but*

“dark and gloomy with a perpetual rain cloud following me” describes me more accurately.

“Listen up, Lord Denning. I’ll be frank—you’ve changed way too much! True, I *do* remember telling you something along the lines of exercise being a good way to relieve your stress, but you’ve overdone it! Did you know that people say that you’ve become a cyclops now because of the weird noises you make?”

“A cyclops, huh? I don’t think I’m *that* much of a muscle-head... But hey, isn’t that the complete opposite of glowing and charismatic? The number of people willing to talk to me keeps plummeting by the day...”

Tina sighed, exasperated. “This has been bugging me for a while, actually. Why are you so insecure about yourself? People don’t talk to you because of how extreme your change was! How many people in the world do you think are able to change from a plump grape to a muscular cyclops in the span of a single month?!”

“Uh, there’s one right here...”

“Right now, the one thing you’re absolutely, definitely lacking is self-confidence! That gives me a good idea. After this class, you should go up to a girl and invite her to tea!” Tina swiveled her head around, scanning the area. “Hmm, how about her?”

“Huh?”

Tina pointed to a petite girl smack dab in the middle of a gorgeous group of them. She wore her ruby hair tied into bunches. Even from this distance, I could hear her mesmerizing voice ringing out loud. She was a fellow second-year student; a young noblewoman from an earldom, and if knowledge served, she was the ringleader of a relatively famous group at school.

I’d never talked to her before, but I knew of her. In the anime, she had made frequent appearances in earlier episodes, when the story had focused on Shuya’s school life. Her name was Lorraine, a cute girl from the countryside who had a slight accent. Confessions from boys frequently landed in her lap, but she just so happened to be an impenetrable fortress who only had eyes for men she thought of as superior to herself.

To be honest, she’s the type of person that I really have a difficult time with, since she blatantly displays what she thinks of other people through her attitude.

“Did you just ask me to invite *her* to tea?” I asked incredulously. “N-No way... It’s obvious that I’m going to hit a dead end!”

“No, listen to me. You’ll definitely succeed! Wait, you know about her?”

“I do, but...she’s the last person I’d want to invite. Do you know how many men she’s driven to the brink of tears before?”

“She’d be the ideal candidate then! If she shows willingness to indulge you, everyone in school will look at you differently! Lord Denning, there are more pressing things than doing dead lifts!”

“But—!”

“The world is now peaceful, Lord Denning. There’s no need for you to become stronger than you already are, so from now on, you should work on your communication skills! Come on, show me how cool you can be!”



Tina had ruthlessly shot down each and every objection I had. I had tried to argue that I wouldn’t know what to do after I made an invitation, but Tina had immediately booked a table for us in an on-campus restaurant popular with nobles. Then, I argued that I didn’t know what topics to make small talk about, and Tina had asked me furiously, “Well, what use are your muscles, then?!” Lord Denning, you only have to be assertive!”

I had never, ever talked to this girl before, and it just *had* to be Lorraine that Tina wanted me to tackle. Things moved so quickly that I thought my brain might explode, but I had no choice but to comply with the orders given to me by my lord and savior.

But what in the world is this?! Who am I even talking to?!

“I confess, I was actually deeply touched by ’ow diligent you were with your workouts, Lord Denning!” Lorraine said excitedly.

I was a little overwhelmed. “R-Really?! I’m honored.”

“Um, Lord Denning, zis is also delectable! Would you care to ’ave some?”

In the anime, Lorraine had been the type of character who loved to butter up people she deemed worthy. She would wag her metaphorical tail at people who were acknowledged by the masses and put on a cold indifference towards those she considered inconsequential. After Shuya had earned the mantle of a hero in the show, Lorraine had schemed to get closer to him, but Shuya hadn’t spared her a lick of his attention. That was the kind of character she had been.

If you looked at her in a bad light, you could say that she was the kind of person who was stuck with the status quo at school. If I wanted to know my standing at Kirsch at the moment, this was the girl to rub shoulders with. *I should never have expected anything but the best from Tina and her shrewdness. Sending Lorraine my way was a calculated move!*

“Sorry, I made an oath to stay away from snacks unless it’s lunchtime,” I said apologetically.

“Oh, as expected of Lord Denning! I heard zat you ’eld yourself to

a 'igh standard, and now I 'ave seen zat it is true with my own eyes... Ah, Lord Denning, may I touch your arm?!"

"Uh, what? My arm? I mean, it's not like I'll lose muscles if you do, so you can go ahead, I guess..."

"Well zen, pardon me... Wow! Zose soft and flabby arms 'ave become so firm! Zis is incredible... What kind of magic did you perform?!"

Uh... Lorraine's putting her hands all over me with a drunken look on her face... Is she a pervert?



Huh, I've never heard her speak in such a sugary tone before. Not even in the anime. In the anime, she had been a mean, unpleasant character to Shuya because of his low family standing. Where did that Lorraine run off to?!

Flustered, I muttered, "Um, Miss Lorraine, personal space please!"

"Oh, please just call me 'Lorraine.' All my friends call me zat!"

"O-Okay, I hear you, so please! You're too close! Aaah!" I yelped.

Up until now, Tina's advice had never failed me. That was why I had forced myself to talk to Lorraine despite being so tense from nerves that I might break in half. I had forced myself to politely ask whether she had any free time to go for tea, just as instructed.

And then *this* happened.

"You're too close!" I wailed.

"I am not close at all! Zis is perfectly normal between friends!"

I had never expected that Lorraine would act so intimately and suck up to me, because this meant...

This meant that, at school, I was near the top of the rankings.



Night had fallen, and I couldn't help but face-palm because Tina had been absolutely right. I'd had fun with *Lorraine*, of all people.

I'd returned to give Tina a complete report after teatime, down to the very last detail. Apparently, she hadn't expected such a magnificent outcome either.

"That girl got all up in my personal bubble... She was never even that chummy with Shuya...!"

My report to Tina went like this: When I made the first attempt to reach out to Lorraine, she ignored me. The moment one of her followers said my name out loud, however, she froze. And then, when I did exactly what Tina told me to do and invited Lorraine to tea, she practically turned into a statue in her shock.

She repeatedly asked me whether I had the right person, and I had to reiterate that my invitation was meant for her. Then she nodded and said yes in a small voice.

"Actually, now that I think about it," I muttered to myself, "Lorraine really *was* ridiculously nervous at the start. Huh."

Lorraine had even argued with *Alicia* before, which proved just how strong-willed she could be, but when it came to speaking with me, all of that guile went out the window. In fact, she wouldn't even look me in the eye at first, and I'd been the one constantly leading the conversation. I thought, based on her reaction, that she must've been bored out of her mind talking to me, and I had offered to end our conversation for the day then and there, but she had apologized

furiously, and the atmosphere had done a complete one-eighty. After that, she regained her usual vigor, and we were able to have an enjoyable conversation. We had even ended up promising to have another tea party together by the end of it.

Following my report to Tina about the tea session, Tina had exactly one thing to say to me: *"It is exactly what it looks like, Lord Denning. Do you finally understand where you currently stand?"*

I must have looked terribly confused because Tina told me that the first thing I should do when I returned to my room was look in a mirror, or something along those lines. She could not stress enough that I should look carefully at whatever I saw in my reflection.

With that in mind, I picked myself up sluggishly and walked to the front of the full-length mirror.

"Where the heck did this mercenary come from? Wait...that's *me*?"

There in my reflection, I found a fearless, shrewd-looking cyclops staring back at me.

I mean, I guess my frustration over my lack of stamina during my battle with the witch has fueled my vigorous training over the past month. Whenever I was at the gym, I made a point of acting as if I were on the battlefield and torturing myself with maintaining a state of high alert. I got this toned body as a result of that.

"Is this for real...? No wonder Charlotte scolded me for going too far..."

The whole rest of the night after this revelation, I kept my face buried in my palms in my shame.

My obesity had been a sore spot of mine. That was why I'd thought that confessing to Charlotte while looking so much like a pig was completely out of the question. This inferiority complex had lit a fire within me, motivating me to work hard and trim down as quickly as possible, but...this sort of change was way too extreme!

Once I set my heart on something, I had a tendency to zone out and rush headlong towards my goal. My decision to become the blackhearted Piggy Duke was another example on the opposite end of the spectrum, for instance.

But clearly I'd gone too far in the other direction. This...was overkill.

"Yo, Denning. Did somethin' good happen or what? Yer grinnin' yerself silly."

It'd been a long time since I last sat in a Magic Studies class that Professor Loco Moco helmed. The professor taught intuitively rather than methodically like a textbook would. I found his lessons rather valuable because of this more hands-on approach. Today, however, his lectures went in one ear and out the other.

The reason? Yesterday's tea session. I was surprised by how much I'd enjoyed myself, and instead of paying attention, I found myself reveling in the day's events.

"I said yer grinnin' yerself silly, Denning. What's up?"

I snapped back into focus. "I-I'm not grinning, Professor," I protested. "Please don't make things up like that."

Did he just accuse me of grinning like a fool with my head in the clouds?! I am a traditional and principled man, I'll have you know. I wouldn't ever 'grin myself silly' merely from having tea with a girl. I glared at the professor for his uncalled-for comment.

"Everyone's been talkin' all about it, Denning. About how ya made a move on the famous Lil Lady Lorraine."

I leaped to my feet before I even realized I was moving. "Wha—" *Made a move on her??? I only talked to her yesterday. That's misleading! And as if that's not bad enough, we're still in class. Everyone can hear him. See, I knew it! I can already hear the murmurs starting.*

What's the professor smirking about?! That guy is way too cruel... But if I make a ruckus here, I risk ruining my reputation as a member of House Denning. So I decided to maintain my composure about the matter, prepared to ignore the professor's words with grace, and sat back down.

"And what's this about arrangin' plans to meet up with her again, hm? Denning, yer quite the womanizer."

I couldn't help it, not with the way the Professor kept goading me—I jumped back up. "Hey!" I yelled. "Professor, that was just a joke, and..."

He's leaking practically all the information about it. How much does he even know?! I can't let him keep running his mouth. Should I... Should I use a spell? Maybe it'd be for the best if I used magic to shut him up.

It was as I was thinking about my next course of action that everyone else began chattering away without any consideration for my predicament whatsoever.

"I'm sooo jealous. Denning can pick whoever he wants nowadays," a boy muttered.

"Lorraine, huh?" said another with a sigh. "If Denning's my rival, I don't have any chance of winning..."

I had only Professor Loco Moco to blame. He'd gotten the ball rolling, so of course everyone started talking about it. The professor smirked at me and how flustered he'd made me. In my eyes, he was *actually* an evil demon. *I mean, yeah, there hasn't been any juicy romance gossip about me up to this point, so I can kind of see where they're coming from. But this is slander! Lies and slander!*

I only invited her out to tea because Tina told me to! I don't have any sort of crush on her at all. I'd never even talked to her in this world before

yesterday. *My heart might have skipped a beat because of how intimately she behaved, but that's beside the point.*

"Oh really?" The professor sounded amused. "I see. So ya were jokin', eh?"

"Yes! I was only joking!"

The professor shrugged. "So that's what he claims, Little Miss Retainer."

"Huh?!" My eyes widened, and I whirled around to face the door. "Ch-Charlotte!"

My dear retainer marched briskly in from the corridor and through the classroom to my desk. "Master Slowe... I know you're technically in class right now, but we need to talk. Please follow me."

I might as well have been a circus clown for all that everyone stared at me. I couldn't have been more embarrassed in my life. But Charlotte wasn't having any nonsense as she grabbed my arm in an iron grip so tight that it left a mark, preventing any means by which I might've escaped her.

"I-It's a misunderstanding, Charlotte! I swear, I didn't talk to Lorraine because of any such frivolous feelings like—"

"Master Slowe... Are you truly already so intimate with the girl in the rumors that you're calling her without any titles? I'm shocked. I never thought you were such a womanizer, Master Slowe..."

"Listen! I'm telling you, I'm *not* a womanizer!"

She held my arm in a death grip that, if I had to guess, was likely leaving welts on my arm beneath my sleeve. *This is bad. This is mega bad. I don't know why Charlotte is livid. Judging by the stack of textbooks in this vacant classroom, she's so fuming mad that she actually skipped class to lecture me instead!*

"Charlotte, you have the wrong idea!" I insisted desperately. "That was, well...a joke! That's right, I was just joking around! I swear, that girl definitely didn't take it seriously either! Calm down and hear me out first! Please just listen to me!"

Charlotte didn't sound convinced. "Oh really? So in your mind, you'd...you'd... Talking to someone for *several hours* while having tea is a *joke* to you, huh?! Even *I* haven't gone on a tea date with you, Master Slowe! Look at what you've done and don't make excuses! Plenty of witnesses said that they saw you grinning yourself silly like some lovestruck fool!"

"Wait, wha...whaaat?! No way! That didn't happen at all! It's a misunderstanding!"

"And you even made plans to meet up again! You knew exactly what you were doing, and clearly you enjoyed yourself! On top of all that, Lady Lorraine is spreading the news of your *voluntary* invitation

all over the campus, and...and...ugh! All everyone—and I mean *everyone*—can talk about is the birth of a celebrity couple at Kirsch!”

“Huh? Really? Wait, no... Charlotte, calling us a ‘celebrity couple’ is taking it a bit too far!”

“Hey!” Charlotte yelled, aghast. “So you don’t deny that you’re a couple, then?!”

“Calm down! People are staring at us from the corridor! Think about House Denning’s reputation!” I pleaded.

“*You’re* the one tarnishing it, Master Slowe!!!”

Only once in a blue moon would Charlotte lose her composure and scold me in public like this. Normally, she was a splendid retainer who always made me look good, whether intentionally or otherwise. However, that wasn’t the case right now. For her to act like this, things must’ve really been spiraling out of control.

“Why is this rumor even spreading so fast?! It only happened yesterday!” I groaned.

“Master Slowe, please pay closer attention to what the girls think about you right now! Have you looked in a mirror lately?!”

“I have! I did for the first time in ages yesterday. I couldn’t help but avoid mirrors because they’re evil fiends that only showed me just how ugly I was, so... Ah, no, you’re getting the wrong idea, Charlotte! Put that fist down! You see, I just wanted to know whether I currently —”

“Master Slowe.”

Charlotte pitched her voice so low that it sent chills down my spine, and I gulped. *Charlotte, you, uh, shouldn’t you be smiling right about now? Ah. My arm hurts an awful lot under her iron grip.*

“I’m not being unreasonable, Master Slowe. If you’re serious about her, then I can accept that, no questions asked. But...”

“But...?”

Charlotte spoke slowly, emphasizing every last syllable. “Please make sure that you never act in a manner unbecoming of a member of House Denning. Do I make myself clear?”

“C-Crystal clear, ma’am.”

I never cared much about my family’s dignity. I hadn’t been the blackhearted Piggy Duke for so many years for nothing. *Plenty of mud smearing to my name.*

“Do you *really* understand what I’m saying?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am.”

But that wasn’t the case for Charlotte. Even back in my orcish days, she had made such a concerted effort so that I didn’t disgrace the name of House Denning. In her eyes, I’d finally become a decent human being, but suddenly, there was the possibility that I might have turned into a playboy, and that was probably unforgivable.

Wait a second, what am I doing just standing around, calmly analyzing all this?! There are more pressing matters at hand! Like redeeming myself in Charlotte's eyes, because her approval of me is dropping by the second! As if it wasn't bad enough that she's distanced herself from me lately, this is just rubbing salt into the wound. I can't let this go on. My heart will break if this gets any worse.

At this point...it might even be impossible to regain her trust. Curse you, Great Tactician Tina! Maybe this is actually all my fault, since it all started because Lorraine ranked me so dang high.

Just as I desperately racked my brain for anything that would placate Charlotte...

"Hey guys, listen to this! Apparently, something crazy happened in the capital!"

...someone yelled *this* out in the corridor.



Gossip often became more and more exaggerated as time went on. As a person subject to many such rumors, I knew that fact better than most. *You can't trust rumors. You really can't. That's why I don't pay any mind to most of the rumors at school. But this time...the situation is a little dire.* There were a few kernels of critical, problematic information hidden within all this gossip I overheard the other students whispering.

"Hey, did you hear about that insane incident that went down in the royal capital?"

"Keep your voice down... I also only heard about it secondhand, but from what I know, some brute wreaked havoc there, right? They say that the Royal Knights were dispatched to detain the culprit and that many of them suffered severe injuries. I even heard that Princess Carina got hurt in the chaos too..."

Charlotte and I fell silent, our argument in the vacant classroom suddenly seeming like we were arguing over nothing. We knew someone that might fit the criteria of the perpetrator. It must've been the work of that *witch*. It seemed that Charlotte had arrived at the same conclusion, because she'd gone pale as a ghost.

Laying a hand on Princess Carina despite the cadre of Royal Knights guarding her was no easy feat. That meant the perpetrator had handily carved their way through the escorting knights like paper. *A person with both the prodigious capability and the desire to make a move on Daryth royalty right now... As far as I know, only a handful of people exist who possess both.*

Charlotte's voice trembled. "Master Slowe, were they possibly talking about..."

"It's just a rumor. We don't have any concrete proof that this

actually happened,” I declared firmly. *Worrying about the rumors won’t change anything. If the rumors are true and the incident happened at the royal capital, we can’t do anything about it since we’re here at Kirsch. It’s just way too far away.* “The defenses of the royal capital aren’t anything to sneeze at, not to mention that the Great Spirit of Light, Lectrikuhl, guards the royal palace too.”

Easier said than done; though it was easy enough to put on a brave face for Charlotte, the rumors actually made me nervous as well. On that fateful night, we had experienced the witch’s malice firsthand. Clearly, the witch had prepared to raise hell, consequences be damned.

I knew very well how powerful the Three Musketeers of Dustour were. One of them had single-handedly pulverized Zenelaus in the anime, after all. *Well, naturally, between Zenelaus of the Freedom Union and the capital of Daryth, we’re more powerful in military strength by far. Even if she’s one of the infamous musketeers, her opponents far outmatch her in strength and number. We have the Guardian Knight leading the Order of Royal Knights, countless soldiers on top of that, and even Lectrikuhl, who protects the people of this land. And, for the time being, at least, we even have the Great Spirit of Darkness on our side.*

“But...” Charlotte trailed off worriedly.

“Everything is fine. We have the Great Spirit of Darkness on our side, and she stands head and shoulders above that witch. We can rest easy and let them carry us the whole way through. There’s a world of difference between that Great Spirit’s abilities and those of the Great Spirit of Wind, which I’m sure you can tell from their relationship.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right... Worrying about it won’t do us any good...”

Still, that rumor... I furrowed my eyebrows. *It was disturbingly detailed and painted a very realistic picture. I can’t help but start thinking of the worst-case scenarios...* No matter what had actually happened in the capital, allowing royalty to come to harm was an egregious failure on the Order’s part. *I can never imagine Cardinal Maldini, of all people, making an amateur mistake like failing to protect confidential information about the Royal Knights.*

I’m curious. I’m so, so curious about what in the world went on over at the capital. But...it’s not like I have that information at my fingertips.

“Wait, actually...” I muttered to myself in realization. There was one likely candidate I could ask. *In fact, that guy definitely knows what happened!*

Yes, that man! The one who recently returned to Kirsch, carefree as always!

“Professor!” I yelled. “Do you have a moment?”

“Denning!” the professor yelled. “How did ya even get in here?! I

clearly remember lockin' my door because students keep bargin' into my room lately!"

This time, I was serious. I'd marched right into the professor's office with my mind set on wringing the truth from him, no matter the cost. *Like always, this place is an absolute mess.* I found the professor slumped on the sofa, reading a piece of paper. The minute I walked through the door, he set it ablaze. *Very suspicious. What is that?*

"Picking a lock between me and my goal is child's play."

"Ya sound just like a bandit, ya know?" the professor grumbled. "So? Why are ya here?"

"I'm sure you already know why."

The professor paused. "If yer under the assumption that I know what happened, yer dead wrong."

"Professor, you were there at the capital. At the very least, you should know more than me."

"I did go to tha capital with the others, that's true enough. But my job was deliverin' them there safe and sound. That, and chaperonin' my former colleague—who got beaten black and blue by that witch—so that she didn't get any weird ideas. In fact, no sooner had I stepped foot into the capital than the old coot immediately told me to head right back here."

"But you only recently returned to Kirsch—"

"Oh, that... Well... The reason it took me so long to get back is because...I was messin' around."

"Ex... *Excuse me?*"

"Try puttin' yerself in my shoes, Denning. I was stuck with the Great Spirit of Darkness on my journey to the capital. I couldn't let my guard down for even a second," the professor said grimly. "Can you even begin to imagine how stressful that was?"

The professor quickly chased me out of his office after that, leaving me to trace back the path I had come. *I actually wanted to confirm one more thing, not just the rumor about the capital. It's the secret he mentioned before, the one I didn't want anyone else finding out about.*

"Maybe...the professor doesn't know what secret I'm keeping, exactly?" I muttered.

Professor Loco Moco had acted like his normal self when he talked to me. If he knew who Charlotte really was then there was no way he could maintain the same attitude with me.

The professor cared a lot about his students and, despite his looks, was a person of integrity. There was indeed the possibility that he had been feigning ignorance on purpose for my sake. That was why I'd planned on looking for subtle changes in his attitude, but...

"Maybe the professor really *hasn't* received any information after

all. Even if he used to be associated with the royal family, that was in the past...”

I couldn't come up with any answers. I suppose I shouldn't have expected any better. *If I'd known this was going to happen, I would have done everything I could to tag along to the capital. I wouldn't be so troubled right now if I had a direct link to the queen and her court.*

“Hey,” somebody said. “Did you hear about the rumor that the queen will be visiting Kirsch?”

Oh damn. I must've really gone off the deep end, imagining such an outrageous claim.

Chapter 2: Eleanor Daryth

In my darkest days, I received the dubious honor of being named the number one Person You Avoid Most at Kirsch. Just as the students steered clear of me, I, too, had people in this world I didn't want to involve myself with. Not if I had any say in the matter. All of the antagonists I'd faced up to this point fell within that category, but within the Country of Knights, the person I was looking at right now was number one on that list, hands down.

"Your Majesty!" a student shouted. "Queen Eleanor! Please allow me to undertake a Divine Tribulation as well!"

"She's the real deal! Our brave heroine who traveled across the entire continent with the noble Guardian Knight at her side! And they achieved this *with just the two of them!*"

Why is the queen here anyway?! Nothing like this happened in the anime. Ugh, I don't know how to deal with things that come up unexpectedly, so could stuff like this not happen, please?

"Your Majesty! I'm a reader of *Crossing a Continent*! Please give me your autograph!" another student gushed.

The queen, Eleanor Daryth, had fulfilled a destiny fit for the heavens all her life. When she was young, she had run away from home. One of the most legendary tales in the south spoke of how, while everyone thought that she'd been off messing around within Daryth's borders, it turned out that she had crossed the entire continent with one lone knight as her companion. You couldn't count on both hands the number of evil organizations she'd demolished, and she made enemies everywhere she charged.

And now, I could see that woman in the flesh. It was impossible to remain calm and composed at such a sight. "Seriously...? So she really is here in person?"

A glorious parade marched its way down the road outside my window. Numerous Royal Knights guarded two carriages, each adorned with the royal crest of two intercrossed white swords. *That confirms it. The queen is in one of them.*

"All of you!" a man barked impatiently. "You are getting carried away! Do not approach the carriage! Do you not realize how noble our passengers are?!" There was a short pause, and the man turned to face the carriage. "Please excuse my rudeness, but Your Majesty...!" The man turned to the crowd again. "Her Majesty has announced that she

will walk the rest of the way! Royal Knights, clear the students away from the carriage!”

A few days had passed since I'd heard the news that the queen would come to Kirsch to offer her condolences to those affected by the fallen star. The entire school had been turned upside down by such an abrupt visit from the queen. Not only that, but everyone had been thrown off their feet by the announcement of such a lengthy stay, though the actual length of her stay had not yet been decided.

Kirsch had even summoned maids and chefs on holiday, and the school staff had worked themselves to the bone, making preparations up until the last minute before the queen's arrival. Truthfully, my guess was that everyone had still doubted that rumor until we saw her caravan with our very own eyes.

The queen stepped down from the carriage and was welcomed with an explosive round of cheers and shouts of joy the moment her feet touched the ground. Her golden hair flowed like a silky river of amber behind her, and even in a crowd, she shone like a star.

Queen Eleanor Daryth was also called Destiny's Favored in various countries, and she had devotees the world over. It was said that Daryth had only been worthy of leading the Great Southern Alliance because she sat upon the throne.

I sighed. "I hope this doesn't turn out to be trouble..."

Though the queen was such a glorious person, I actually didn't have a very good impression of her.

A dark, sinister character of Daryth, Eleanor Daryth was a woman who loved forcing unreasonable demands on people, commonly referred to as Divine Tribulations. These were trials bestowed by the queen, and sometimes challengers would meet their unfortunate ends while undertaking them. Even so, everyone given the honor of taking up such a challenge would risk their lives in an attempt to succeed, because all those who came out victorious would make a gigantic leap in personal growth.

The prime example of this was probably the Guardian Knight Sir Delfrey, who had completed his own Divine Tribulation by traversing the entire continent at the queen's side. I remembered being enchanted by the book that recorded the journey when I was a child, reading it over and over and over again.

"Eleanor Daryth and the Cowardly Knight: It was said that a miracle must have happened for young Rudolf to make it among the ranks of the Royal Knights. In an attempt to toughen him up, Eleanor decided to take him with her on a journey around the continent. They overcame towering mountains that climbed into the heavens, they tackled the sands of the Dagon Deserts, they conquered wicked, inhuman creatures, and finally, they crossed the continent. After this ordeal, Eleanor, with Sir Rudolf by

her side, defeated the Guardian Knight of the time, and Eleanor ascended the throne as the youngest queen in history..."

In the anime, Eleanor Daryth had placed Shuya on the "world savior" pedestal and had used him harshly. To me—to someone who wanted nothing more than a peaceful life—she was a threat. I wanted to avoid her at all costs.

Still, I couldn't help but stare. "No matter how many times I look at her, it's really her, here in the flesh."

I had a good view of the queen's arrival from the fourth floor of the boys' dorm. Milky-white clouds soared freely in the sky on the horizon. Beneath those azure skies were crowds upon crowds of people. They all had the same goal: to catch even the slightest glimpse of the queen.

I must say, I'm surprised that the queen would choose to leave the impenetrable fortress that is the royal palace. I wouldn't be surprised if it were the case that she was going overseas, but a domestic royal visit is more than extremely rare. Even Princess Carina came with her this time.

"This lineup of knights is phenomenal... They're all household names..." I muttered.

Sir Dalton and Sir Kushner weren't the only ones present either. There was the Guardian Knight, the queen's hand-selected personal guard, and even Sir Bernice, one of the strongest men amongst the ranks of Royal Knights.

I'm currently maintaining a neutral stance on the Guardian Knight offer, so it could potentially be a terrible thing if one of them finds me...

I scanned the crowds. "I'm a little bothered by the fact that I don't see the cardinal anywhere among them..."

The man who would normally be the one at the helm of such an entourage, Knight Commander Johannes Maldini, wasn't anywhere to be found. In his stead, the Guardian Knight kept a watchful eye on the proceedings from the back of his white horse.

"Gah."

To make things worse, I spotted a most unpleasant sight. A young, ephemeral girl who had both the innocence of a child and the bewitching allure of a woman stepped out of the carriage behind the queen. She looked gracefully up towards the sky, and slowly, her lips formed a smile...and it was aimed right at *me*.

I took a sharp breath. *Oh no, our eyes met. Why the heck is she here? What was the queen thinking when she decided to bring this girl here?!*

It was none other than the boss of the Dustour Empire, the Great Spirit of Darkness herself.

I could only shrink into myself and tremble in the corner of my room. *What in the world is this all leading to?!*

The students all chattered excitedly to each other.

“We mustn’t be late to the ceremony! Being able to see Her Majesty and the noble Guardian Knight up close is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! No, even less than once-in-a-lifetime!”

“Come on, let’s hurry to the auditorium! Yewes said that he snagged front-row seats!”

“Her Majesty is watching! Don’t be noisy during the ceremony!”

“I *know* that, O mighty Inspector Daniel!”

On occasion, bigwigs would show up at Kirsch and hold a seminar. These bigwigs came from a variety of backgrounds—some were commoners who donated large sums to the school, some were distinguished clergy from other countries, and so on. The point was, they came here to gain publicity. Usually, a ton of students would skip out on attending those kinds of ceremonies, but it was different this time. Everyone rushed to snatch the best spots.

I let out a sigh. Technically, it was compulsory for everyone to attend the ceremony, but I was playing hooky, so to speak. Frankly, I wasn’t as excited about the queen’s visit as everyone else. *I mean, I’ve already met her a few times before.*

That wasn’t the main reason I was boycotting the ceremony, though. “Oink...”

A small breeze gently struck the large, statuesque knight square in the back. *A warrior experienced in magic combat should easily be able to tell that my spell just now held no malice.*

All right, he noticed it. All according to plan. Good, good, he’s walking this way.

I played hooky because I had something that I wanted to ask the Order. I didn’t think they would just tell me what I wanted to know, but when I had looked at the lineup earlier, I spotted a familiar face. And so, I was currently hiding in one of the classrooms in the school building.

“Hey there, lad. Only bad boys skip out on ceremonies, you know,” the man said.

The man carried a greatsword on his back with which he’d once cleaved in twain a monster disguised as a boulder with a single strike. Such a feat had earned him the moniker of “the Destroyer,” or “the One-Strike Knight.” He’d come to Kirsch Mage Institute previously as part of Princess Carina’s cadre of guards. This Royal Knight, Sir Dalton, had an oppressive aura as always, but he greeted me amicably.

Just like I had planned, Princess Carina’s loyal subject entered the school building and joined me in the second-floor classroom.

"It's been a while, Sir Dalton," I greeted. "But I must argue that I didn't skip out irresponsibly. I did it because there are more pressing matters at hand."

"Then why do you hide? Your actions speak for themselves. It is almost as if you are declaring a guilty conscience."

"I'm only hiding because I thought that other knights bumping into us would cause trouble for the both of us, that's all."

"Oh?" He cocked an eyebrow. "Concerned for me, were you? I see. You certainly are a thoughtful one. However, I must warn you that there is information I cannot share. Do not anticipate too much. I keep my secrets well." The man looked around the classroom pensively. "This brings back memories. Her Highness used to attend classes in this classroom."

"Is Princess Carina well?"

"You may go see for yourself. Meeting her might be rather tricky during her stay this time, though. So, Slowe Denning, what business do you have with me? Or rather, what do you want to ask me?"

"I saw the Great Spirit of Darkness. Why is *she* here as well, Sir Dalton?"

I didn't know what truly went on in that Great Spirit's head...or whether she was currently an ally or foe. She had indeed promised her full cooperation on the matter of the witch, who had gone against her will and had schemed to start a war. But that promise wasn't a good enough reason for her to come all the way out to this school.

"Ah, that. You would have learned the answer to that question immediately had you attended the ceremony. The Great Spirit of Darkness is here as a diplomatic representative of a foreign country, and she has come to observe this school since it is one of the most celebrated learning facilities in the south. Or at least, that is what we will announce to the public. I am willing to bet that nobody has realized that the girl accompanying the queen inside the auditorium is the Great Spirit of Darkness, the very same one who founded the Dustour Empire."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Don't be so impatient, lad. On that topic, I hear tell of you being the first person to come into contact with that Great Spirit. Though I had known about her from reports, when I saw her for myself, I was stunned. To think that such a petite girl was actually the legend of the north that I had heard about as a child, passed down from generation to generation... Not only that, hearing that the south's sworn enemy voluntarily offered her assistance was surreal."

I said nothing, waiting for him to continue.

"Now, as for your question... You see, the Great Spirit of Darkness brought up that she wanted to tour a school in this country. As you

might expect, there is no way we could let her walk around freely by herself. That was why this was a convenient occasion for us.”

“Did you actually believe her when she said such a thing?”

“The Great Spirit of Darkness has officially struck a deal with Her Majesty as an ally to combat a foreign enemy who has come from the north. I am sure that you are also aware of this fact, but the Great Spirit of Darkness does not wish to fight us.”

The Great Spirit truly wished to stop the witch. I was sure about that, but at the same time, I really couldn’t imagine her staying put and not stirring up trouble. She was, after all, a famed collector of young mages. *I’m sure that, internally, she’s boiling over with excitement at being inside a foreign mage school.*

But even if she does go on a rampage, from the looks of things, we probably have just enough military strength to deal with her, in my opinion. We have the Guardian Knight on our side—an unmatched knight like him would never let pride get the better of him, no matter the circumstances. I have full faith in his abilities.

“In that case, Sir Dalton, could you please tell me one more thing?”

His reply was flat. “In my eyes, I already made an unprecedented exception by answering your first question.”

“There is a strange rumor spreading in the school, an unbelievable one about how a fiend injured Princess Carina. What in the world happened in the capital?”

“You said it yourself—they are little more than rumors. You would be a failure as a member of House Denning if you took such nonsense at face value.”

“The thing is, the rumor circulating around here feels odd. I don’t think the famed Knight Commander would let any rumors about the royal family run wild like this. And just as such a thought took root in my mind, I noticed that I haven’t seen Cardinal Maldini at all, despite the fact that the queen and the princess are both here. Why is that, I wonder?”

“I do not owe you an explanation. I advise you to keep your distance from such matters.”

I felt cold sweat form on my body, along with a sinking feeling of dread. “Something *did* happen in the capital, didn’t it?”

“A word of warning, if I may. Do not involve yourself in this matter. It will likely be detrimental to all parties involved. I am saying this because I am indebted to you. You’d do well to remember that. If you try bringing up this topic to any of the other Royal Knights, you will only find trouble.”

“Thank you very much for your advice. Okay, since that question is a little tricky, how about this one? Sir Dalton, where did that wound

on your face come from? Did you get caught up in a brawl or something?"

There was a scabbed-over laceration down his face that I had been curious about for a while. After all, this man was a behemoth of a warrior. He was the cream of the crop even among Royal Knights, and that was why he was the one charged with Princess Carina's safety. He was a few years too old to qualify as her Guardian Knight, but if he were just a little younger, it was very likely that his name would be on the list of potential candidates to grow and improve with the princess as well.

"A brawl, you say? Indeed. Now that you mention it, it was a brawl, or something similar to that."

"Your opponent was someone powerful enough to injure even *you*, Sir Dalton. Wh—"

Before I could finish my sentence, a tremor jolted the ground beneath us. Along with it, voices swelled into frenzied cheers and screams of elation. *Was there a special announcement in the auditorium during the ceremony?*

"Are you curious?" Sir Dalton sounded slightly amused. "You would know if you had attended the ceremony like a good student. Now then, I believe I have said too much already."

I hadn't paid any attention to the uproar. *The queen probably said something empowering or moving during the ceremony. It's nothing significant, at any rate.*

But as it turned out, I was completely off the mark.



The queen had made an announcement in regard to Princess Carina, the heir to the throne. She had chosen this school as the site of the Prayer Ceremony, which would be a step towards officially naming the princess as her successor. *This also means that the curtain will rise on the ancient and prestigious Guardian Selection.*

"So that rumor *was* true!" a student yelled excitedly. "You know, the one about how Professor Yugiri was selecting candidates for future Royal Knights!"

"Oh darn, I should have tried promoting myself to the professor more! All the chosen ones are going to have one-on-one direct training sessions with Royal Knights, right?! That's a dream come true!"

There was only one trial the princess had to pass in order to ascend the throne. It was simple: the princess and her chosen knight had to defeat the current Guardian Knight in combat. It was deceptively simple in theory; in practice, it was a difficult feat to achieve for a myriad of reasons, not the least of which being that the current Guardian Knight was said to be the strongest man in the

history of Daryth. The Prayer Ceremony, where the princess would select her companion knight who would challenge this fearsome man alongside her, was the starting point of this trial.

“But hey, Denning’s name wasn’t brought up in the ceremony earlier, right? Is it even possible for him *not* to be chosen?”

“That guy’s probably stronger than the Royal Knights, so he’s likely in a special category. Ah, but Professor Yugiri didn’t really like him, so maybe he was simply left out...that, or maybe the queen had a hand in it.”

The queen had unquestionable authority in the Country of Knights, and it wasn’t just because of her cross-continent journey. She had become the queen in her early twenties, so she was still young, and whenever her Guardian Knight stood guard beside her, the two of them were as picturesque and stunning as a painting. That was why she was also astoundingly popular with the students.

Our generation had grown up reading the book depicting the queen’s adventures, so we had this odd sense of kinship with her, so to speak. But that wasn’t all. No matter what your status was, if your ruler was someone this awe-inspiring, it would lead to having pride in your own country. Or that was my theory, at least.

“But Mister Cyclops doesn’t look like he’s bitter about it at all,” a guy commented.

“He’s a Denning, remember? I’m sure he has a secret in with the queen or something.”

Well, I do hear that it hadn’t been smooth sailing when she inherited the throne back then because she had become queen at an unprecedented age. People said that she was too inexperienced and that other countries might look down on us because she was so young. But the impact of her journey across the continent was so great that it was enough to silence all those objections down to the very last one, apparently. This only lasted until I was born, but it was, in fact, so legendary that all the citizens of Daryth were spellbound by the queen.

A student muttered, “What I’m more surprised about though is that Princess Carina chose Kirsch’s cathedral as the prayer grounds. That place is, well, you know... I still can’t bring myself to enter it even now. I get flashbacks...”

The queen had designated Kirsch Mage Institute as the location for the ceremony due to Princess Carina’s ties to the place, which was an honor to bestow upon the school. At the very least, it seemed that this place had left her with fond memories. I might have been *just* a little over the moon about that fact.

“So you weren’t chosen, huh, Valjean? Even though it’s your dream to become a Royal Knight?” I quirked an eyebrow.

“Please don’t rub salt in my wound, Lord Slowe... I still haven’t recovered...” Valjean mumbled weakly.

“Oh, so that’s why you have bags under your eyes. You must have it pretty bad for you to have trouble sleeping. I’m also guilty of that, though, so I get what you’re feeling.”

“I’m so glad to hear that you can empathize with me,” Valjean sighed.

Apparently, during the ceremony on the day before, the queen had named about a dozen students as candidates for the Royal Knights. She’d even gone on to say that due to these students’ talent, the Royal Knights would personally coach them while they were here at Kirsch. The nomination probably didn’t guarantee their induction into the Order, but naturally, the ones aiming to become Royal Knights were likely excited like never before.

“But Shuya was chosen, right?” I pointed out.

Valjean gritted his teeth. “I know that he seems to have improved after the holidays, but why *him*?”

On the other hand, there are also people who are depressed like never before. “Even I have to admit that Shuya has changed. That guy has this strangely prominent presence now, doesn’t he?”

“I...suppose he does,” Valjean admitted begrudgingly.

“He probably escaped a near brush with death somewhere.” I shrugged. “Boys will be boys.”

Valjean chuckled. “You don’t sound like a fellow student when you say things like that, Lord Slowe.”

Still, Shuya, huh? I suppose the great anime protagonist shines in the eyes of people who know what to look for. Maybe they can sniff out the hidden potential within him or something. Even if the war doesn’t happen, eye-catching people will remain eye-catching all the same.

The students’ gossip picked up around me.

“If I remember correctly, the students chosen are gonna be paired with a Royal Knight each, right? And have one-on-one coaching, in fact. They’re being super generous.”

“Hey, have you heard about why Denning didn’t get chosen?”

A while ago, the queen offered me the position of Princess Carina’s knight. I haven’t officially replied, so it’s currently on hold. That doesn’t change the fact that I’m disregarding the queen’s words though, so my will should be pretty clear in their eyes. On that topic, I was half suspecting this, but the queen does seem to want the princess to quickly take her place.

“So apparently, somebody asked why Denning wasn’t named, and guess what? They said that he’s qualified in terms of ability, but his personality could use some work.”

“Just keep this between you and me, okay? From what I hear,

they don't want Denning getting close to Princess Carina. I dunno why, but yeah. Guess only having power going for you isn't enough after all."

Ugh, they're so annoying. Thanks for your concern, but I don't mind it at all! In fact, I'm actually happy that I wasn't chosen! I can hear you all! You know that, right?! There's a thing known as self-restraint!

"It's just a coincidence," a boy said lightly. "I was probably only chosen because I'm a water mage like Professor Yugiri."

"But the professor didn't give me an invitation to her private lessons even though I can use water magic too. That means you're amazing, my lord, just as I thought!" a girl declared.

Everywhere, people were clamoring about the students chosen as knight candidates. Every single time we walked past these triumphant candidates, my pitiful friend's shoulders would droop in reaction. *But if he keeps getting hung up on something this minor, he'll never make it as a Royal Knight anyway.*

As I patted Valjean on the back and told him not to worry about it too much, I found myself looking towards a certain Royal Knight. He had been one of Princess Carina's guards when she had last visited Kirsch, which had seemed like such a long time ago now. This man was Sir Kushner, and there was a girl—a student—standing next to the guy.

"S-Sir Kushner! Please take care of me!" the girl said earnestly.

The man nodded. "Rest easy. You have me by your side."

"Yes, sir!"

What did I just see?! A girl-guy pair?! That's a dream come true! On top of that, they're one-on-one, so they'll be together at all times, right? The girl seems tremendously grateful to have been paired with a handsome Royal Knight, and Sir Kushner doesn't seem dissatisfied at all. Hey, you! You've got to be kidding me! You should look after Princess Carina and not this girl, okay?! I forced myself to calm my roaring emotions.

"Hmph!" I harrumphed, letting out short, aggressive grunts. *I-It's not like I'm mad about not being named or anything, I swear.*

"Hey, Mister Cyclops over there is going wild," a guy whispered.

"Yeah, he must be pretty rattled by it all. Everyone thought he'd be chosen, after all."

O-Oh, will you just shut up?! I repeat, I don't feel like that at all! Not even a smidgen!

However, my weight training that day continued all the way into the night.



I wonder why the queen is visiting Kirsch. True, the Prayer Ceremony for Princess Carina is important, but does it really call for the queen to

come with the Order marching in town? They haven't even said how long her stay will be. Something smells reeeally fishy about this.

"I...I spoke with Her Majesty!" a boy babbled. "I'm so surprised by how friendly she is."

"I never imagined that I would be able to hear the tale of her journey from the queen herself! I even got an autograph!"

But...trying to act all chummy with the queen and her crew would be pretty improper, considering all I did. I'm insisting on acting aloof towards the Guardian Knight offer as if it has nothing to do with me, after all. Weeell... I suppose I coould say that if I were a bit more honest, it is bothering me.

"Princess Carina seemed to be a little in low spirits though, don't you think? The rumor about her being injured by a ruffian in the capital must be true. Hey, you should go ask her."

"No way! No way! Have you seen the ridiculous number of Royal Knights attending the princess? She might even have more than the queen herself!"

"That's likely because the queen has the Guardian Knight with her."

"Aaah, that makes sense. He is the Moonlit Knight, after all... He's leagues above the Royal Knights..."

You know, I just had a thought. I'm straining my ears to eavesdrop on these rumors, and I'm being led by the nose by all kinds of stuff people say... I'm absolutely pathetic. But I don't have any other choice. Everyone gets the jitters around the newly muscular Slowe, after all, so no one will talk to me!

So apparently, people have been calling me "Mister Cyclops" lately. Huh.

Putting that aside though, they say Princess Carina is in low spirits. Hmm... I mean, in terms of personality, she's the polar opposite of the queen, so she probably wants to remain a princess for as long as possible. The queen is a woman of initiative who sneaked out of the country with the man who would become the Guardian Knight when she was a teenager and successfully completed a journey across the whole continent. But Princess Carina is the hermit type who would hide away in her room all day long if she had the choice, sooo...

"Ah, hey, Denning!" a familiar voice called out to me. "What a rare sight. You're not secluding yourself inside that gloomy place you call a gym today, huh?"

I turned towards the guy. "Oh, it's you, Shuya," I sighed moodily. "This is the worst. I bumped into someone troublesome."

"Denning, come look at this. You weren't chosen as a candidate, so it's the first time you're seeing this, right?"

“That’s the scabbard of the royal family... More like a replica of it, anyway. I’m impressed, Shuya, that you could be so happy over a mere fake handed out to the knight candidates.”

Of course it’s the anime protagonist’s job to show up at a time like this. He seems awfully giddy. Even this guy, with a brush with death under his belt, would get pretty hyped up over a nomination by the queen.

“I realized something important, Denning,” the redhead announced. “At the end of the day, strength isn’t really what matters. I mean, being capable is important, of course, and I know that. But, well, I don’t know whether this would make sense to you, but the heart is what matters most. How do I put this... I think it’s one’s drive to protect Princess Carina and one’s wish to stand by her that counts the most, I guess.”

What are you looking all smug for? When did you even pick up such an expression for that matter, huh? Have you already forgotten how Princess Carina completely ignored you when you tried talking to her before?

Arguing over silly things like this didn’t get us anywhere, but... I don’t dislike it, for some strange reason. That’s the problem. I mean, it’s Shuya I’m talking to, so, you know. But still. I’m not sure if this makes any sense, but I feel like a proper teenager right now.

Now, people fear me as the resident “Mister Cyclops” instead of as the Piggy Duke. Even swapping insults like this is water to my parched, desolate heart. If only I wasn’t talking to Shuya, it would be perfect.

And I’m the kind of guy who’d notice things that others might not. A miserable-looking girl passed us by, and I moved on instinct before I even had time to think.

“Out of my way, Shuya.”

“What?! Hey!” he yelped in indignation. “Why did you shove me all of a sudden? Don’t get your panties in a bunch just because I was boasting!”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. I’ll listen to your bragging all you want later, all right?!”

“Denning, what in the world are you looki—” Shuya frowned as he followed my line of sight. “That’s...Princess Carina? Oh... Wait, Denning, weren’t you on good terms with her or something when she visited Kirsch a while ago?”

“I can say that I’m much closer to her than you are, at least.”

That’s right. I asked him to move it because I saw Princess Carina. The princess had a gaggle of students following her around as she made her way through campus. Our eyes met. I was pretty sure she looked right at me, her lips moving silently as she mouthed two distinct words in my direction.

Help me.

“What’s with you, Denning? How can you still say that with such confidence when you were the one who rejected the offer to become her Guardian Knight? Well, I’ll have you know that you’re not allowed to go back on your word! You can’t ask for another chance just because she’s so cute in person that you regret turning her down after all!”

I recognized what Princess Carina was mouthing to me. The moment I realized that, I marched forward.

Shuya kept on babbling in the background. “Oy. Heeey, Denning! So you *do* regret it after all! I can totally get what you’re feeling, but you should give up! Isn’t it a little late to go back on your decision?!”

Give up what? What is that guy going on about? I have absolutely zero desire to become the Guardian Knight, thank you very much. Zero, zilch, nada. It’s just that I can’t help but feel uneasy. I might be looking too deeply into it, but I think that she wants to tell me something. Her actions earlier are more than enough evidence of that, so...

“Princess Carina,” I called out to her. “If you are feeling unwell, would you like me to escort you to the infirmary?”

Everyone knows that I brushed off the offer of becoming Guardian Knight. How would people react if I started displaying concern for Princess Carina now?

A male student of large stature wedged himself between the princess and me. Multiple sets of eyes dug into me like knives, and people shoved me in the back to hurry me along. Clearly, I was unwelcome, which I’d expected.

A student piped up from the crowd. “What’s with you, barging in all of a sudden? *We*, the ones chosen as future Royal Knights, were tasked with the honor of giving Her Highness a tour, not you, Demming.”

“I’m afraid that my name isn’t Demming, my upperclassman friend. It’s *Denning*,” I corrected him.

“You’re such a nag!” the young man said with a scowl. “From what I hear, you even recently laid your grubby hands on the renowned Miss Lorraine. Don’t you think that you’re indulging in too much lechery? This is extremely unbecoming of a reserved Daryth noble.”

“Have I ever been reserved before?”

For a moment, he said nothing. “No,” he admitted begrudgingly.

“I thought as much. In that case, please step aside. Or do you wish to take me on?”

“But you... How could you appear out of nowhere and talk like that?!” There was a slight moment of hesitation before he continued in a murmur, “I will step aside, though.”

Even if the queen had acknowledged these people as the most

promising among the student body, they should've known the truth better than anyone else by now—that they could never hope to even hold a candle to me in terms of ability. *Now that that's out of the way, the real problem is actually those knights standing behind the crowd. The Royal Knights exist to protect Daryth royalty with their very lives.* Ignoring the upperclassmen, I turned to face the knights, and...

After a long moment of hesitation, I chickened out. “I understand,” I said. “I shall back off today.”

The young man let out a long, loud, and incredulous shout. “Denning?! What in the world? What'd you even come here for? Hey, yooou!”

I'd prepared with a fiery passion to defy these people just a moment ago. But now, I turned tail and fled in a heartbeat, leaving the upperclassmen to watch on dumbfounded by this turn of events. *Have none of them noticed anything? Seriously? Those Royal Knights were a split second away from drawing their swords on us, you know!*



To my dearest noble knights, who are weighed down by anxiety and frustration... Did you know that weight training is the perfect remedy for your stress? Honestly, I want to share with them this key to success that my savior blessed me with.

“There should be a limit to how uptight you can get,” I whined.

Those Royal Knights sure were in a foul mood. What's with them? If looks could kill, I'd be dead several times over! Especially the ones in charge of protecting Princess Carina. The moment I approached her, they got so aggressive that I thought for sure they'd pull out their swords for real! It takes way too little to set them off, don't you think? They've got way too short a temper. Hmm, I wonder if it's because I'm ignoring the Guardian Knight stuff that they're so cross with me.

“Master Slowe! I heard that you argued with one of the knights! Is that true?!”

“You really are always the first to know when something happens, aren't you, Charlotte? But I didn't argue with them. We were just playing around, and—”

“Why do you keep causing problems?! And you just had to pick now of all times, when we have to tread carefully!” Charlotte lowered her volume. “We can't let other people overhear us, but you know, Professor Yugiri has...” Her voice dropped into a barely decipherable mumble. “...my identity is...” I strained my ears to listen but only caught a little of it before she perked back up to a regular volume. “So lately, I've been keeping a low profile so that I keep the knights as far away from me as possible!”

“Sorry about the you-know-what. It's just that I wanted to

apologize to Princess Carina about the offer to become her Guardian Knight. After all, I indirectly rejected it, so... And now that she's here in person, I couldn't just ignore her," I said sheepishly. "But I'm really sorry about all the worry I caused you."

"I was so scared! I thought that you might've argued with the noble Royal Knights because of me being you-know-what, and..."

"I think the you-know-what probably isn't a problem. So far, they haven't gone out of their way to approach me or anything, so at least we have that to go on. That's what my gut is telling me, anyway."

Charlotte took a deep breath. "Okay, I hear you. Please don't do anything dangerous though, Master Slowe. You're on thin enough ice as it is! I'm worried about you..."

"I already suffered enough during the incident with Professor Yugiri, so I won't do anything like that again... I'm traumatized by all that, so I plan to stay away from all the complications."

"Please do..."

"Anyway, Charlotte, I know I'm changing the subject here, but have you changed your makeup?"

You might be thinking, "Hey, Slowe, that's way too off topic." But no, no! Don't underestimate how long I've been with Charlotte. You see, this cyclops has an attentive side, and I could notice even the smallest change in my sleep. Okay, I was able to immediately point out a minute change of a girl. That would give me many bonus points, right?

"Ah, this is, well... I made a lot of new friends, and... I didn't know that the nobles used such expensive perfume, so I thought that it might be better if I did what little I could to match them..."

Oh, I see. She's taking the same classes as noble students now, so she needs to groom herself to an appropriate level. That's a good thing. So why is Charlotte shrinking in on herself like a cat that's getting scolded?

"U-Uh, I'm not angry at you or anything, Charlotte. You're also a student now. Plus, my heart swells with pride whenever I see you making all kinds of new friends."

"Huh? You're proud of me?" Charlotte paused. "So, Master Slowe, you also feel the same way as I do?"

"I do. You feel this way too?"

"Of course! Every single day, I wish that you'd become friends with all kinds of people and hope that more and more people would realize how kind you are! Ah, but you mustn't *only* be friendly with girls. People will start thinking weird things."

"Nah, they won't. But Charlotte, uh, how do I put this... I think that you're doing way better than before."

"Wha..."

It feels like she's come into full bloom now, and... Aaah, I can't take this! I'm making myself shy! But...just like how I felt when Lorraine

showered me with compliments, I realized that people get really happy when they receive praise. Look, Charlotte's face is all red, but she seems overjoyed behind that.

“Jeez! Why did you just say that?!” Charlotte flushed.



Yup. Just like I thought, she seems really happy.

While Charlotte practically glowed with energy, someone else fell on the complete opposite end of the emotional spectrum, skulking around all frail and timid-like. That someone was none other than the demon cat who, like me, had also earned themselves a rather interesting nickname on campus. *Yes, you guessed it. It's the Orc-Hunting Cat, the Great Spirit of Wind.*

The Great Spirit of Wind had a hobby of regularly hunting monsters lurking in the forest, and though Charlotte had taken every opportunity to tell them to stop, this hopeless cat hadn't gotten the message at all.

"Great Spirit...why are you sneaking around? That's not like you."

"I'm going to leave campus for a while so that a certain unpleasant someone doesn't find me, meow."

"A certain unpleasant someone?" It took me a second before it dawned on me who they meant. "Oh, right, the Great Spirit of Darkness. I forgot that you two don't get along."

After the battle with the witch, the Great Spirit of Darkness had targeted the Great Spirit of Wind with her relentless teasing. Altanger fleeing was a rare sight; it really seemed that they were on bad terms with Nanatrij.

"This country has gone mad, meow. Joining forces with her? Ridiculous. Wasn't she Daryth's enemy not too long ago? How could she just waltz around the place like she's a citizen here, meow?"

"Well...the world of humans is a complicated place," I said sagely.

"Slowe, wherever she goes, disaster follows in her wake. That's why I've told Charlotte to run away so many times, but she doesn't listen to me at all. I've decided that I'll disappear for as long as *she's* at Kirsch, meow."

"Disappear? Well, I suppose you did start to blend more into the background once the Great Spirit of Darkness showed up, but... Are you sure about leaving Charlotte alone?"

"She's been going through a rebellious phase lately. Putting on makeup and all that... She seems to be having so much fun. It's so unfair, meow."

A "rebellious" phase? Uh, that's the one word I'd never associate with Charlotte, but... "Charlotte said that she has more friends now, and she's probably dealing with things like social expectations and the company that comes with friendship. The human world is complicated. I know you might be unhappy, but she can't just spend all her time doting on you."

Charlotte is busy every day. Even to me, it's clear she's having the time

of her life, so she probably doesn't have any spare time to entertain such a demonic cat.

"All of this is only happening because you talked to that weird person, meow. Charlotte is jealous. It's all your fault, meow."

"She *what*? Charlotte is jealous? Wait a minute, I can't let that go. Tell me more! Hey, Great Spirit! Where are you going?!"



Daryth had earned the moniker "the Country of Knights" for one main reason: the princess's ascension to the throne required her to earn her way there by rite of combat.

"I wonder what kind of qualities Princess Carina looks for in her ideal knight?"

"Strength, probably. She can't become the queen unless she defeats the current Guardian Knight with her chosen knight, after all."

Exactly that. Together with her chosen knight, the princess would challenge the active Guardian Knight, and only victory would bring her the crown. This system had led to the birth of the nation's title.

"Would she reject something like kindness? Wasn't there once a queen at some point in history who looked for kindness in her Guardian Knight?"

"Either way, unless her chosen knight defeats the current Guardian Knight, the princess's knight can't take over that position, so in the end strength is the only option. But realistically speaking, don't you think it's probably going to take her a few decades before she can ascend the throne?"

Take Sir Delfrey, for example, the knight who had accompanied Eleanor Daryth on her journey to the throne. This man's experience from his travels across the continent had netted him a remarkable level of power, and it was with that power that he had defeated the Guardian Knight before him. Among all the anecdotes about the victorious challengers of Eleanor Daryth's tribunals, Sir Delfrey's story was probably the most widely known. After all, the queen had won her right to the throne in her early twenties with Sir Delfrey, making her the youngest queen in the history of Daryth.

"But to be honest, I actually don't know much about Princess Carina. She isn't the type to show up at balls or dinner parties, right? Just between you and me, I'm a bit doubtful about whether such a princess could win against someone as powerful as Sir Delfrey. I'd bet good money that the current queen's golden age won't come to an end anytime soon."

"That's why the princess has to be desperate to come up with some kind of power that could secure her victory against that Guardian Knight. Once she makes up her mind, she's going to visit

Letrikuhl with her knight and implore the Great Spirit for a new spell.”

“Yeah, unless she has something on the level of a new spell or a new branch of magic, she won’t even be playing on the same field as Sir Delfrey, let alone stand any chance of actually winning.”

The prayer for the Guardian Knight, huh... I know how much of a hermit our royal princess likes to be, so I can’t imagine her choosing to plot what kind of magic to request of the Great Spirit over staying in bed all day. Huh. The difference between the princess I know and their impression of her is, well, a little fascinating.

Now then, to sum things up, the final test for the princess and her chosen knight is to defeat the Guardian Knight. The princess will rely on a spell she created, and the knight will have their combat prowess speak for itself. Passing the trial means the pair becomes the next queen and her Guardian Knight, and the students chosen as Royal Knight candidates for this very purpose are currently receiving personal special training from the Royal Knights in active duty.

“Hey, you know how the knight trainees are apparently invited to dine with the queen and her entourage on occasion, right? Have you heard about how Her Majesty and Princess Carina argued during one of these dinners yesterday?”

“Nope, tell me more.”

I came to a dead halt, curiosity piqued, and I couldn’t help but eavesdrop.

“So apparently, the queen said to the knight trainees, ‘If Princess Carina takes over the throne in her current state, this country will fall into ruin. All of you should consider your choices carefully.’”

“Sure enough, it seems like the queen doesn’t even cut Princess Carina any slack from her strictness, huh?”

“You know, no one knew much about Princess Carina until recently, right? Not even us nobles. Commoners didn’t even know what she *looked* like, so would the citizens actually celebrate her ascension to the throne if she did succeed somehow? Pretty much everyone commemorated the current queen’s coronation, so... I don’t think the queen was trying to denounce the princess or anything, but... I hear that everyone froze when she made that statement.”

“That sounds awful... I definitely wouldn’t have wanted to be there.”

“But then Princess Carina talked back to the queen. She said that she wouldn’t become someone who forces people to face certain death and call it a ‘tribulation.’”

I felt my chest grow tight. *I had a feeling that was the case with Queen Eleanor and Princess Carina, but...they really are on the worst possible terms with each other. Their natures must not sit well with each*

other.

That reminds me of one thing, actually. In the anime, the queen also made Shuya go on a reckless trial. Alicia had turned on her then, saying that the queen shouldn't make Shuya do something so dangerous.

"So here's where things get interesting: after the princess left, Shuya, of all people, snapped at the queen!"

"Wait... He *whaaat*? You've got to be kidding me!!!"

"You'd think so, but no, it's apparently true! He raised an objection to the queen, saying that such a statement was too cruel to Princess Carina. Well, I heard that the Royal Knight assigned to him immediately chased him from the room, though."

"...That guy just ruined any future prospects he had."

"If we have to choose between making a good impression on Princess Carina or the queen, of course we'd choose the queen! And now, Shuya has no chance of continuing down the path of a Royal Knight. Serves him right."

Shuya had no connection at all to Princess Carina in this world, not at this point. He had no reason to go so far for her, especially when doing so meant that he would leave a bad impression on the queen. *Acting out for someone else without a shred of self-interest, huh...? That guy really never changes.*

"Valjean," I muttered. "You heard them talking. If you were in his shoes, could you do what Shuya did?"

"There is no way I could. This is the queen we're talking about! That guy... Shuya must not value his life much if he managed to snap at the *queen*..."

Shuya, who had no connection to Princess Carina whatsoever, had snapped at the queen despite the obvious consequences. He was one of the chosen knight candidates receiving special training, so doing this would mean he ran the risk of closing off an important door to his future. Yet, Shuya had managed to call her out directly to her face.

"I'm a little annoyed," I admitted slowly. "Somehow, it feels like I lost to Shuya."

"Huh? What do you mean? I don't think he holds a candle to you any way you look at it, Lord Slowe."

Shuya had once wished to join the army, but with the world veering towards peace, most nobles in his position aimed for a position among the Royal Knights instead to get ahead in life. With the queen's scorn weighing him down, Shuya had little chance of pursuing such ambitions. *But would someone in his position really dare to stand against the queen? As far as I know, nobody in their right mind would dare pull that off. Shuya...you really are amazing.*

“Lord Slowe, where are you going?” Valjean asked.

“I’m just heading off for a bit. I remembered something I need to do.”

How can I stay silent after hearing about such bravery from Shuya?



There had always been guards stationed around the dorms for female noble students so that boys didn’t approach carelessly, but now that the queen and her subjects were accommodated here, the atmosphere had changed abruptly. Many Royal Knights stood on alert at the entrance, their expressions solemn and no-nonsense.

“May I request a meeting with Princess Carina?” I asked politely.

One of the knights twitched an eyebrow. These men were taller than me, making it effortless for them to look straight down at me, and easier still for me to see the hostility burning in their eyes.

“Her Highness has to perform her ritual soon. This is an important time for her right now. Nobody is permitted to enter her private quarters. No exceptions.”

To Royal Knights, protecting royalty was their duty. These guys were extremely menacing and more on edge than usual, making them stick out here on the peaceful campus.

But I wouldn’t give up that easily. “A while ago, I caught sight of Princess Carina looking worn out. I came here because I thought that I might be a good person she can turn to if she has any worries weighing her down.”

“Unnecessary.”

“I do believe I was a good confidant for the princess during her previous stay at Kirsch, though, was I not?”

There is the chance that I might have gotten the wrong impression when last I saw her. I’m aware that if that’s the case, I’m probably just making a fool of myself. But...at that moment when she mouthed “Help me,” she looked as if she was at her wits’ end. How could I ignore such a plea?

I continued to plead my case. “The first part of her prayers is to choose a place where she met people with whom she shares ties of fate, a place where she can reflect fondly on all she has done up until now. Since Her Highness chose Kirsch Mage Institute as the location for her prayer grounds, I believe I am one such person she shares ties with.”

The ritual in preparation for her trial consisted of two parts. The first was a pilgrimage around places that were special to her, to interact with things and people she had ties with. The second was to seclude herself in a church and pray to the heavens for a spell that would grant her the power to defeat the Guardian Knight.

The reigning queen had sought out strength when selecting her ideal Guardian Knight. She followed a straightforward example, a precedent set by many members of the royal family who had demanded strength as the necessary trait for their future Guardian Knight in the past. *I wonder what Princess Carina would look for in hers.*

The knight only had one thing to say to me: "Leave."

Surely this reaction isn't normal. According to Sir Dalton, it is beyond doubt that Daryth has joined forces with the Great Spirit of Darkness. However, she is still the leader of our nation's enemy. I'd thought that the Royal Knights were so on edge because the Great Spirit of Darkness was around, but...why are they so high-strung? Is there a different reason?

"Don't you think that you're being too threatening? You only wish to drive me away, right? I cannot help but get the impression that you wish to prevent Princess Carina and me from coming into contact by whatever means necessary... In that case, please pass on a message to Her Highness. Please tell her that I came to see her. Or perhaps there's a reason you want to keep us away from each other?"

"Is there no end to your chatter? If you continue any further, I shall be forced to draw my blade—"

A dignified voice rang out, interrupting the knight. "What is this commotion?"

The voice belonged to a man that every person in the country would recognize. White armor shone where it hung from his body, and a white, unblemished cape fluttered down his back, both symbols of his position of singular prestige. His eyes of melted gold were as sharp as those of a hawk, and anyone those eyes focused on would surely feel that time itself had stopped.

The knight I'd been arguing with answered hesitantly, "Sir Delfrey, I..."

"This one is beyond your capabilities, Leonardo," the man said.

Among the Royal Knights, this man was small in stature. Despite that, and despite coming from a relatively humble background compared to the others in the Order, the entire Order looked at this man with awe and respect. Known by many as the Moonlit Knight, he was a warrior of unmatched skill within the Country of Knights, and he was standing *right there*.

He looked at me. "Slowe Denning. I believe we have warned you to stay away. What business do you have with Her Highness?"

"I am only here as Princess Carina's school friend, and—"

"How...tedious," he muttered.

The Guardian Knight drew his sword from its sheath. He drew it in the span of a single breath, and I didn't even have enough time to reach for my wand before he brought the unsheathed blade down towards my neck.

The sword he had was the Mystical Sword of Light, the national treasure of Daryth which granted its wielder overwhelming power. I gave up on defending myself with my wand, but my right hand snapped up to grip the Mystical Sword firmly in defiance before it met its mark.

I almost want to praise myself for managing to react to the Guardian Knight's movement, but... Blood trickled down my hand. Several female students who'd been watching the whole exchange with concern in their eyes screamed at the sight of it.

"Let go. If this lasts any longer, even the most talented of water mages could not heal it," he said coldly.

Hey. You know, I didn't come here on a whim. I was prepared to face the consequences of my actions to a certain extent. Shuya lashed out against the queen even if it meant ruining his future in the process, so how could I give up here?

At least, that was what I'd thought, but...

"Slowe Denning," the man announced, his voice grave. "My orders represent the will of Her Highness. Look behind you."

Princess Carina was there inside the female dorms, a knight escorting her. She panted for breath like she'd rushed out of her room in a hurry. The moment I saw her, I let go of the blade. *To be honest, I didn't have any definite proof that Princess Carina was looking for help. I only followed my gut, which led me to draw that conclusion.*

But this time, I could read her lips easier than I could when we passed each other before. She only had one word for me: "Sorry." I hesitated in silence for a brief moment before I spoke up.

"I shall come another time."

I can't do anything about it if the person I came to see has rejected me.



I returned to my gym with my head hung low. I'd been spending nearly all my time here lately, so nobody dared approach this place. I was glad for the solitude—I didn't want anyone else to see me looking so pathetic.

"Oiiink..." I whimpered. *I was so confident and showed off so much, but in the end, Princess Carina herself rejected me.*

My injured right hand bled uncontrollably. Healing spells wouldn't work on wounds caused by that Guardian Knight's blade, which complicated matters quite a bit. The blade was infused with the power to cause such cursed wounds, and since it prevented healing magic, I could only leave it to heal on its own over time. *If I had Shuya's Main Character Syndrome, would things have turned out differently?* I thought bitterly.

"That looks pretty nasty, Slowe Denning," a voice chimed.

There were plenty of ghastly rumors surrounding my so-called slaughterhouse. *And for someone to call out to me so brazenly...they must either be oblivious or fearless.*

"Sorry, but I'm in a very bad mood right now, and— Oh. It's you, Great Spirit of Darkness."

The Great Spirit of Darkness, whose maturity contradicted her girlish, charming looks, shook her head at me as she approached.

"To think that you caught that Guardian Sword with your bare hands... Have you lost your mind?"

"I can't even come up with a response to that..."

"Lectrikuhl has enchanted that thing with several troublesome spells. I only know the most famous ones, but there are a bunch, and negating healing spells is one of them."

"I honestly never thought that I'd find myself on the wrong end of the Guardian Sword either."

She heaved an exaggerated sigh. "All right, show me your wound. I won't hurt you or anything." She placed her small hand above my wound. Her hand glowed gently, and the pain gradually subsided. "And there you go. All healed."

"Th-Thank you...very much..." I stammered. *No way! That was a wound by the Guardian Knight that even my Heal spell couldn't touch!*

There was such a stark difference between the levels of our abilities that I couldn't help but defer to her instinct. Just now, she had negated the power that Lectrikuhl had embedded in the Guardian Sword. "But, um..." I asked haltingly, still stunned by the display. "May I...ask why you were willing to heal me?"

"Ew, don't talk like that. As for why, well... You put on a good show for me. That's why."

"A...good show, you say?"

"Rudolf Delfrey is genuinely a genius whose name even spreads far and wide in the empire. I thought he'd be one of the biggest obstacles in taking down the south. And then it turns out there was a human willing to foolishly face that guy head-on! So? How do you feel now after you humiliated yourself? Thoughts?"

"Terrible, to say the least... I want to dig a hole and bury myself in it..."

"Huh. You're pretty honest. That's news to me."

I really do feel awful. I ran my mouth and sounded so pompous, but then Princess Carina rejected my presence. I don't even know how I'll show my face around school tomorrow...

I stifled a sigh. "So, why are you here? Weren't you supposed to be busy sightseeing a foreign school, Great Spirit of Darkness?"

I heard the occasional rumor about how this lovely foreign princess would ask teachers questions in class just to trouble them.

Just hearing these rumors had been enough for me to deduce that this Great Spirit was enjoying school life to the fullest. *If I remember correctly, they introduced her as foreign royalty in the ceremony when they first arrived. I bet that none of the students have caught on to the fact that this girl is the infamous Great Spirit of Darkness.*

"I'm here because I heard some intriguing gossip about how a certain Slowe Denning threw down the gauntlet with the famed Guardian Knight and got himself injured as a result. But hey, shouldn't you have realized the truth long ago? None of those Royal Knights like you at all. It's not hard to tell."

"Well, yeah... Even the most oblivious guy would catch on if they had that many sharp gazes relentlessly stabbing their back."

"If you make any more attempts to contact Princess Carina, they're going to despise you even more. At worst, prepare for that figurative stabbing to become literal! Those guys aren't in their right mind right now."

"In their right mind? You must know a great many things, Great Spirit of Darkness."

"I sure do. Tell you about them though? Never!"

"I don't get it," I muttered at length.

"Because I think you shouldn't get involved."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Slowe Denning, I can easily guess your opinion of me. In truth, I don't think you're far off the mark either. But I'm harmless right now. I've promised Eleanor that I'll remain a bystander until I return to the north. Eleanor is trying to deal with the current incident using the Royal Knights, and if that's what she wills, I can't do anything. I hope you can forgive me!"

She grinned teasingly at me. The ruler of the Dustour Empire and one of the supreme conquerors of the world turned on her heel, her long hair flickering and gliding like smooth silk behind her. A pleasant fragrance wafted from her, which somehow irritated me.

"But out of respect for your courage in opposing the Guardian Knight, I'll let you in on one thing. If you want to carve an opening for yourself, you should make your offense on the tame princess, not Eleanor. Or perhaps the knights are a good choice too. After all, those guys finally seem to have realized how cold they're being. A little late on the uptake there, though."

I blinked. "Huh?"

"See you around!" Wagging her fingers, Nanatrij walked away.

What the heck? I don't follow. But I feel as if I just received a major hint...or maybe not. I can kind of see why so many mages worship the ground she walks on so much. She has a mysterious charm. But...I mustn't make too much contact with her. The minute I start getting interested in

her, that'll be the end of me. I'll be dragged deep into the bottomless darkness she holds...



I yawned in the middle of my groan. *I couldn't get any sleep at all, even though I slept plenty fine for a while... This is all because the Great Spirit of Darkness said something so intriguing! She told me that I shouldn't get involved, but then she dropped such a vague statement! What's with that? Does that mean the stuff with the witch isn't over yet?*

So they didn't solve everything in the capital after all? What in the world happened over there? Not to mention, why would the Great Spirit of Darkness agree to remain a bystander? At the end of the day, isn't the empire the root of all evil in this incident? One of their fighters is going berserk, so their leader should be the one to take care of things! The Great Spirit of Wind got crushed like a bug, but if it's the Great Spirit of Darkness on the case, she should be able to win a one-on-one match.

I couldn't directly unload this on the person in question, so I grumbled about the girl to myself instead. In the middle of my mental tirade, a knock came at the door. "At this ungodly hour...?" I moaned.

I rolled off my bed and opened the door to my room. A burly man stood there.

"S-Sir Dalton!" My voice trembled from shock. "What are you doing here?"

"May I have a moment of your time? I wish to see your room."

"Ex...cuse me?"

Deep creases ran across the planes of his face, and I wondered what kind of life he must have led to form them. The man looked around my room with fascination, as if he weren't one of the longest-serving knights of the Order and didn't have a greatsword strapped to his back, before taking a seat on a chair. *He's lounging almost as if he's in his own quarters. But let me remind you that this is my room!*

"What a nostalgic room. I used to stay in this room once too."

"Um... Excuse my rudeness, but do you know what time it is? I am afraid that my room isn't a twenty-four-hour tourist site for anyone to enter whenever they feel like it."

"Well, you see, I came here to pay my respects to the clown who challenged the noble Guardian Knight. Now, you are faring a lot better than I thought you would."

Ugh, him too? It didn't stop at the Great Spirit of Darkness! Is it that fun to humiliate someone?

"Slowe Denning," he addressed me, "what are your thoughts about taking that noble knight on?"

"I feel terrible. I don't stand a chance against him. Now, I'm utterly stunned at how foolish I was."

“That is understandable. Even I haven’t been able to wrestle a win from him, not even once. I could even go as far as to say that man is the epitome of the ideal, perfect knight.”

“Challenging him was a mistake,” I said gravely. “Ah, would you like a drink?”

“Well now, aren’t you a good host? In that case, I shall take you up on that offer.”

For a while after that, a peaceful silence hung between us. Sir Dalton said nothing, only quietly tasting the coffee I brewed for him. *The beans may be of the highest grade, but the maker, yours truly, is an amateur. It’s probably not that good.*

“Wonderful,” the man said slowly.

“Thanks, I guess.”

And that was it. *What’s with this guy? I hope he leaves soon. This is my room, you know?*

“If only Her Highness were here to experience this as well.”

“Princess Carina probably enjoys much more delicious coffee than anything I can make.”

“She would be delighted. Her Highness likes you a great deal, after all.”

“I... I have no idea how I’m supposed to respond to that.”

“I speak the truth. However, I am not here to drink your coffee, but to thank you.”

“To *thank* me?”

“Thank you for taking on the Guardian Knight...for coming to see Princess Carina. I am sure that action alone was enough to bring much relief to Her Highness.” With that, the man *bowed his head at me.*

“P-Please wait, Sir Dalton! Please raise your head!” I babbled, stunned beyond comprehension. *There’s no way I’d feel comfortable having a grown man bow his head towards me like that!*

“I have heard that everyone involved at Kirsch has stretched themselves thin to welcome us, such as summoning the maids back from their vacations. I am sure that you also have many theories of your own about why the Order has come, Slowe Denning.”

“Well, yes...”

“However, I can say with the utmost confidence that your guesses pale in comparison to the truth. The situation has surpassed even our worst nightmares, and the Order of Royal Knights faces an emergency of unprecedented severity. You asked me, some time ago, about the person behind this wound of mine. ’Tis a trifling matter to give you the answer you seek, but I must ask a request of you before I can do that.”

Sir Dalton’s demeanor changed in an instant; I could see every inch of the man forged and tempered through the fires of his many

long years swathed in a dangerous aura.

A busy Royal Knight had come to my room deep into the night, and I doubted that he was only here to have a chat. *A request, he says. So that was his aim.*

“Slowe Denning. I ask that you help Princess Carina.”

And just like that, in exchange for making a fool of myself, I had arrived at a significant truth.

Chapter 3: Inside the Forest

I know I'm repeating myself, but let me say this again: the thing about rumors is that they tend to exaggerate the truth.

This is going way back, but when I was playing the part of the blackhearted Piggy Duke, the rumors about me were grossly untrue. They said I was the personification of an orc, that they'd get piggy cooties if they approached me. There were more than several ridiculous, made-up stories about me, and before I knew it, I was backed between a rock and a hard place.

In other words, I'm trying to say that people shouldn't trust rumors at all, but...

"The battle in the capital was so gruesome that I hesitate to even speak of it... Only the word 'ghastly' can describe that battlefield."

To put it mildly, the story I heard from Sir Dalton was shocking. I'd worried that the Royal Knights had discovered Charlotte's identity, I'd worried about Charlotte because of her seemingly rebellious phase, and I'd worried about a hundred other things. But this revelation was so overwhelming that it blew all of these worries clean out of my head.

"We Royal Knights have marched upon many grim battlefields, but even now we would feel an icy chill down our spines, thinking back to that fight."

The reality that Sir Dalton recounted was far and away more appalling than the conclusion I'd arrived at based on the gossip. My blood ran so cold that, on reflex, my expression schooled into a grave one.

The knight continued. "Do you know why the royal palace is so proud of its impenetrable defenses?"

"Sanctuary," I answered immediately. "The path leading to the royal palace is shrouded with gray fog, and anyone who enters would lose all sense of direction, both vertical and horizontal. Distances within the sanctuary are amplified to many times the original, and if you take even one misstep off the correct course, you'll never arrive at your destination. Am I right?"

"Indeed. The royal villa where our royal family resides even has a special barrier that the Great Spirit Lectrikuhl maintains, and it is so sensitive that it can detect any and all humans that pass through it. We never imagined that the royal palace would become a

battleground. Not even in our wildest dreams.”

“Please tell me you’re joking, Sir Dalton. Are you implying that someone smashed open the *Sanctuary*, the Great Spirit’s spell?”

“The witch appeared out of thin air inside the Heavenly Mandate Chamber of the royal palace, where Her Majesty rests on her throne. I believe that answers your question.”

“No...way...”

“Yugiri and the Great Spirit of Darkness both said that it was highly likely for the witch to come straight for Her Majesty’s life... We had taken measures to prevent that, such as assigning more guards. It all came to naught. In the end, only one man managed to respond to the assassination attempt. If the noble Guardian Knight hadn’t cleaved in twain the witch hidden in the shadows with a single strike... I shudder to think of the consequences.”

The Guardian Knight Sir Delfrey was the queen’s sword, and legends said that he had cleaved a dragon clean in half during his prime. *But wow... I can’t believe he managed to not only notice the witch who can move in the shadows, but also slice her in half like that. I’m surprised he even managed to leave a scratch on her.*

“Um... In the end, though, Her Majesty is in good health, which means that all of you managed to drive the witch away, right...?”

“The witch did indeed voluntarily retreat...which means that even she had made a miscalculation. It seemed that she’d had no inkling as to Her Majesty’s character.”

“Did the queen do something...?”

“The witch took a soldier hostage, and Her Majesty ordered that we ignore the hostage. And...” The man trailed off. “That, I am afraid, is all I can say.”

I was speechless.

“After the incident, I heard from the Great Spirit of Darkness that the witch of the north apparently values her comrades greatly. She probably doubted her eyes when Her Majesty attacked her with no regard for that soldier’s safety. I must say, Slowe Denning, though you had the help of the Great Spirit of Darkness, it is extremely impressive of you to have forced that witch to back off.”

“No, I haven’t done anything... To be honest, I owe it all to the Great Spirit of Darkness...”

As I listened to Sir Dalton’s epic tale, that much was clear, but another thought plagued my mind at the same time. I was thinking about the Great Spirit of Wind and Charlotte’s true identity.

Frankly, I had been prepared for the worst-case scenario on this matter. The Great Spirit of Darkness probably wouldn’t mention anything unrelated to the topic at hand, but Professor Yugiri was a Royal Knight. However, so far, Sir Dalton hadn’t mentioned anything

to do with us.

“There will be no second time,” he swore. “Next time, we *will* end her... That will be our way of bringing peace to those who have perished due to that woman’s machinations.”

“Wait... Hold up.” I had to interrupt. “How did this all lead to Her Majesty’s stay here at Kirsch, though?”

I understand that the Royal Knights’ battle is still ongoing. They suffered a humiliating defeat, lost their comrades in arms, and even failed to prevent the queen’s crisis. Sir Dalton just declared that they definitely won’t lose a second time, and I get that, but if all of that is still going down...then why are the knights here at school?

“The Great Spirit of Darkness speculated that after the battle at the royal palace, the witch changed her objective, and the queen firmly agreed. Now, the witch is no longer aiming to resume the war...but to murder Her Majesty.”

That’s the surprise of the century, I thought sarcastically. Their natures clash hard. Even in the anime, despite all her inhumane actions, the witch always made it a point to treasure her comrades.

I have a bad feeling about this. “Wait a minute... Sir Dalton, are you all possibly—”

For some reason, the extremely nervous look on Princess Carina’s face wouldn’t leave my mind. *That’s right, didn’t she try to ask me to save her?*

A ferocious smile pulled at the corners of Sir Dalton’s mouth, and it was almost as if I were meeting him for the first time. “We came here to this school to bring down the witch...and Her Highness is bait.”



No way. No freaking way. They’re planning on ending the witch here?! That mage is no normal mage, and she’s even able to launch offensive spells from extraordinary heights, but they’re saying that they want to kill her here at Kirsch?!

“Keep your eyes focused in front of you, not flailing around like that. And make sure you stay close to me,” the man warned. “If you get lost, you will have to start from the beginning again.”

With Sir Dalton’s aid, I successfully infiltrated the girls’ dorm. The moment I set foot on the landing to the stairs leading to the fifth floor, where royalty resided, the air changed completely.

Fog shrouded the entire place. Not just any old fog either. *This is...Sanctuary. The same Sanctuary spell that conceals the royal palace now enshrouds the inside of the girls’ dorm.*

“When in the world did you do all this in the girls’ dorm? I can’t believe you cast a *Sanctuary* spell on campus. Alicia lives on the same

floor as Princess Carina... Did she give her consent?"

"If you are talking about Princess Alicia, we persuaded her to move downstairs at our request."

I swear my eyes bulged out of my skull. "Alicia put aside her pride and moved floors?" *Maybe she caught on to the danger lurking around here after hearing that they were going to erect a barrier. She's a sharp one, after all.*

Anyway...how much longer is this going to take? Why are we walking for so long even though we're only going up one floor?! Normally, it wasn't this complicated to find your way to the bedrooms for royalty, where Princess Carina was probably staying. I only had to climb the stairs, walk straight down the corridor, and make one turn around a corner, and yet... How many times have we been up and down this flight of stairs again?

"I must say that I can hardly recognize you, considering what you looked like before." There was a hint of approval in his voice. "You have done well to so thoroughly train your body despite the difficulties you must have faced."

"Well, you see, I sacrificed all the joys and meanings of life to lose all this weight."

There was a pause. "I see."

What I couldn't bring myself to say was: *I ended up overdoing it when it came to building muscle. Oops.*

"Slowe Denning," he addressed me, "before you meet with Her Highness, there is something I wish to tell you."

"What's that?"

"I wish to tell you about the relationship between Her Majesty and Her Highness. You might have heard bits and pieces from the rumor mill, but I am afraid that their relationship is strenuous, at best. I fear that this incident may damage it beyond repair."

My eyes widened. "Sir Dalton, are you saying that you're willing to tell *me* the details?"

Sir Dalton answered me while guiding me through the *Sanctuary*. "I realize that you are more caring and meddlesome than I thought, and I wish to prevent you from playing with fire out of ignorance." After finishing that sentence, he lifted the corners of his lips into a forlorn smile.

To be honest, I was just as curious as everybody else about their relationship. My theory was that Princess Carina's lack of appearance in the anime had something to do with her strained relationship with her mother.

And thus, Sir Dalton began narrating the story. "It had all begun when Her Highness displayed a unique and outstanding talent. Despite her tender age and lack of formal education, Her Highness manifested

magic after picking up only a fragment of a discarded wand she found on the ground somewhere.”

“She *what*? That’s a terrifying amount of talent...”

“As one would expect, Her Majesty was elated. After all, Princess Carina had managed to manifest magic one year earlier than Her Majesty had in her childhood. The fact that the future queen had promising talent in magic called for celebration.”

Often, geniuses had anecdotes that befitted and proved their marvels. These stories about Princess Carina’s phenomenal incidents that Sir Dalton recounted were filled with surprises, even to someone like me.

Here, his tone shifted. “Her Majesty searched far and wide for a teacher befitting Her Highness, and in the end, this proved to be a mistake. The teacher in charge of Her Highness’s education went too far, and she lost all interest in magic. In other words, her overzealous approach destroyed her talent.”

I see. So just like me, that person went overboard, huh?

Sir Dalton continued. “In an effort to rekindle the princess’s interest in magic, Her Majesty gave her full freedom, not just in the aspect of magic and her education thereof, but in all aspects of life. She was given so much freedom, in fact, that even we Royal Knights felt that Her Majesty was too lax in allowing the princess to do as she pleased. Traditionally, princesses of Daryth would learn magic directly from our Great Spirit Lectrikuhl and the queen herself, but this did not apply to Princess Carina. This hands-off approach is likely the reason Princess Carina began to believe that the queen doesn’t love her.”

“Then...the reason Princess Carina didn’t make public appearances in social gatherings was...”

“Due to the free rein Her Majesty had given her. However, Her Majesty must have realized that this could not go on, for she changed her policy and began actively taking part in the princess’s life. However, this didn’t go well either. Even in the eyes of us Royal Knights, her actions were too cold and indifferent. It was inevitable that Her Highness would rebel.”

“Uh, Sir Dalton...” I hesitated. “I can spot knights up ahead. Are you truly okay with telling me all this?”

“It is not an issue. All the knights protecting the *Sanctuary* tonight are fellow comrades who grieve the relationship between our queen and our princess.”

The knights held sources of light as they patrolled the *Sanctuary*, but they acted as if I were invisible and not present at all.

“We all insisted on only being silent observers on the matter of their affairs, but now it is too late. Even if we act so that they could at least salvage what little remains of their relationship, it is hopeless. Of

this much I am aware. This time, however, we cannot sit idly by and watch as Her Majesty gambles with the princess's life."

Two big eyes grew even larger. "No way! *Slowe*? How did you get in here?"



There she was, the nostalgic hermit princess. Her eyelids fluttered rapidly in surprise, though her expression remained cheerless. She sat in her bed, as always, with only her head poking out of the sheets to stare at me. If I had to describe her, I'd compare her to a tortoise coming out of its shell for the first time in forever.

"My room is under the protection of *Sanctuary*... You definitely can't find your way here unless you know the way. How in the world did you get around that spell, Slowe?"

"You see, Princess Carina, I had a little help from a certain worried knight."

"Help? Ah, so Dalton planned this whole thing... But there must have been other knights on the way here too, and there's even the hardheaded Homminett at the door to my room... Which means that they're all in on this, aren't they?"

I would have been shocked too if I were in her shoes. Getting to the princess's room was extremely difficult, and I would never have made it without Sir Dalton showing me the way. *I didn't even know that there was an invisible sixth floor here in the first place!*

As for the other knights, well... All the ones I passed by on the way here pretended they couldn't see me. It seemed that they all knew about me coming. Thinking back now, it's rather fascinating. I thought that all the knights hated me, but maybe not.

"So why are you here?" Princess Carina muttered impatiently. "I may not look it, but I happen to be *very* busy, you know!"

"So you say, anyway. But I'm willing to bet that you were just sleeping the whole time."

"What about it? Got a problem with that?"

"I don't, but... Well... I just had the thought that you haven't changed at all."

Princess Carina had continued acting like a hermit in her bed upon her return to Kirsch, just as I'd expected. Even her bedroom windows were all shut, the stuffy air hanging heavy about the room. It was almost as if time had stopped for a while. There was tableware on the table that showed signs of having been moved, so I guessed that she was eating properly, at least. *You'd still get hungry even if you aren't moving around. That's just life.*

"Hey, since you've gone through the *Sanctuary*, I think you know by now that the spell has two uses. One is to keep out trespassers. Do you know what the second is?"

For a moment, I was at a loss for words. "Is it possibly...the fact that it keeps people from getting *out* as much as it keeps anyone from coming in?"

"Exactly. So it should be pretty clear to you that I'm a bird in a

cake. Listen, Slowe. You're poking your nose into something serious. You should turn back before it's too late, if it's not too late already."

"I've already heard about what happened in the palace."

"All the more reason you should keep away. I'm sure you're aware of that. I know that you're only a bit nosy because you're so considerate of others and all, but... Ah, that reminds me, a while ago, you also—"

"I'd rather know everything there is to know about the situation rather than going in underprepared. I was the first one to fight that witch, after all."

"Look, I'll let on a little bit since you've come this far, okay? The witch isn't aiming to resume the war anymore—her goal has changed. I mean, deep down she still probably wants that, but her biggest target right now is my mother. Apparently, that witch can't bear the fact that my mother remains the supreme ruler. That's why you're an outsider now, and it's none of your business."

I can tell that she's concerned about me, but I can't back down either. I came here with resolve burning inside me, and I'm not about to let that fire go. She might have forgotten about it already, but I remember clearly how Princess Carina silently begged for my help. Well, we all know what happened after that, with the Guardian Knight teaching me that painful lesson, but I will never forget what she said to me that day.

I decided to cut right to the point. "One of the knights claimed that you are bait to draw out the witch... What did they mean by that?"

"Slowe..." Princess Carina said at length. "Are you *sure*? I think you can't back out of this one once you know about the plan..."

"I came fully prepared for the consequences."

Hearing my confident declaration, Princess Carina huffed a huge sigh. "Okay, so here's the deal. That thing about me being bait? It's exactly what it sounds like. The witch wishes to beat my mother beyond all recognition, and for that reason, she wants to take me hostage. Most likely, the witch has the idea that I'm the most important person in the world to my mother, which is wrong. I think you can figure out the rest. In other words, if anyone's going to draw out the witch as bait, it's going to be me."

"During your prayers, you'd be alone, which means that... Am I getting this right?"

Still buried under the covers, Princess Carina nodded with a disinterested look on her face. "Yep. That's why my mother, for all her nagging me endlessly about it, doesn't complain about me holing up in here for now. She wants me to stay safe until then..."

I didn't know anything about the battle that Sir Dalton, the queen, and the princess had gone through at the palace. But the witch

Francisca had probably discovered the abnormal side of Queen Eleanor Daryth there.

The princess continued. "I think I kind of get why the empire's witch is so obsessed with my mother. I've heard that she's deadly as an enemy, but also that she's hailed as a hero for treasuring her comrades and saving many lives in the north. In the palace, the witch used many people as meat shields, but mother didn't even hesitate for a moment before attacking them. Even *I* was pretty aghast at that. Don't you think mother was crazy doing that, Slowe? Wouldn't you be surprised too?"

"I..." *I know about her, and because of that knowledge, I'm not shocked at all by her decision.*

Indeed, the queen and the witch could only be mortal enemies. The witch treasures her comrades as she would her own family. Killing a comrade who has sworn loyalty to her without batting an eye goes completely against her morals. It was because of this kind side of her that she was able to establish such a massive network in the north. I guess it's a different type of charisma from the queen's.

"Ah, I get it. You're from House Denning, so you must be used to that kind of thing."

"That's not really the case, but..."

"But what about the students at Kirsch who worship her as their hero? What would they think, I wonder?"

I didn't have a reply to that.

Princess Carina went on. "You know what I mean. Everyone has the impression that my mother is exactly the same as her character in *Crossing a Continent*, but that book is filled with lies. Don't you find it hilarious? That thing was edited in such a way that it would paint my mother in a good light and aid her in her path to becoming the queen despite her youth. But everyone takes that fiction as the absolute truth. I mean, those two did indeed make the journey across the continent, but if you've read it for yourself, I think you'd know what I'm getting at. Didn't you think it was a little too good to be true?"

"Y-Yes, I suppose...I-I did think that..." *With the way the conversation is going, I can't admit that I was engrossed in the book when I was a kid too... I was on the edge of my seat the whole time I read it. With one thrilling event after another... I was completely mesmerized by the knight's growth and the queen's determination.*

"If that book didn't exist, my mother's ascension to the throne would have taken much longer. Even though she managed to wrestle a win from the Guardian Knight at the time, unless the citizens of Daryth welcomed her as queen, enthronement would've been impossible..."

Yeah, that makes sense. I heard that thanks to the book, public opinion

of her becoming queen immediately changed in her favor. It was a time when the threat of the Dustour Empire grew more and more pressing with each passing day, so the masses wished for a strong ruler to lead them.

But...huh. Though she's angrily tearing this so-called "book of lies" to shreds, Princess Carina is very talkative about the topic. She's definitely read that book cover to cover. Probably more than a handful of times too.

"It's the same in the royal capital and here in this school.

Everyone has the wrong impression of my mother because of that book's influence, and—" Princess Carina paused. "Ah, I'm sorry, Slowe. I've only been complaining this whole time..."

"I-It's fine. You could say that it's the reason the Royal Knights allowed me to come here, after all."

I must say, though, this might be pretty severe. When Princess Carina slanders the queen, she practically has stars in her eyes. She reminded me of everyone at Kirsch back when they had despised me during my blackhearted Piggy Duke days. Everyone seemed so happy whenever they called me a human orc behind my back...

"Now then, Slowe, I have a question for you. Why did mother and I come to Kirsch Mage Institute, now that you know for sure that I'm to lure out the witch as bait?"

"That's the one thing I can't find an answer to, Princess Carina. No matter how hard I think about it. The Royal Knights will probably end up facing the witch, but where in the world would this battle take place...? It doesn't take a genius to know that the students are going to get caught up in the aftermath if it's here."

"Since you've managed to get some of the knights on your side, I'll make an exception and tell you this: the battlefield isn't at Kirsch."

"May I ask you to elaborate?"

"There's a special mechanism in this school that will allow mother and the knights to fight at an advantage, so we're here to make use of it. That's also the reason we chose Kirsch as the site for my prayer ritual."

Princess Carina rose up and reached towards the table. *Ah, that was close!* I nearly saw what was, well, under her clothes, so I slammed my eyes shut on instinct. Then, I felt her place something in my hand.

My eyes slowly opened. "A...watch?"



A watch. Hmm... A watch, huh? According to Princess Carina, all I had to do was follow the needle in whatever direction it pointed when it stopped. It was not unlike a compass in that regard, one that showed me the way to where I needed to go.

I hummed to myself in thought and snorted a little as I walked

around the school grounds, following that needle. I immediately realized that the watch was leading me off campus.

“Slowe, hold up a minute.”

I’ve gotten myself too deep into this incident. I’m aware that things are probably going to get pretty crazy from here on out. Once I go to the place in question and find whatever this needle is pointing me towards, I won’t have a chance to run away anymore. I’m going to end up diving right into this scheme that the queen and the knights have cooked up.

Someone grabbed my shoulder hard, pulling me from my thoughts. “Hey!” they yelled.

I wasn’t left wondering for long. It was Alicia. *She’s always so rough*, I grumbled internally. “Sorry, but I’m in the middle of something. If it’s nothing important, could you leave it for later?”

“What’s with that attitude? A certain someone here is going out of her way to give you a warning, you know,” she said with a harrumph.

“A...warning?”

“Gossip’s going around that you seduced Lorraine, of all people.”

“I *what*? I... Wait... I seduced *who*?”

“That girl’s going around saying that you’re crazy about her, Slowe. You must have terrible, terrible taste if you’re gonna pick the likes of her. What the heck were you thinking?”

My eyes widened. “There’s no way I’d ever do that!” *Maybe talking to Lorraine really was a mistake after all.*

“Oh, really? Well, whatever. Anyway, why are you in such a hurry? You don’t look so good either...”

“Sorry, Alicia, but let’s talk about this another day, all right?”

“Listen up, Slowe. I saw you looking on edge, and that’s why I thought that maybe...you heard about it all from Miss Charlotte, but it seems that you’re frantic because of a separate matter, huh?”

“Wait, what are you talking about?”

“Huh. You’d notice silly stuff in a heartbeat, but it looks like you’re hopeless about things in *that* category. Charlotte told me to keep quiet, and, well... Yeah, I might do that.”

“Seriously, what are you on about?”

“Nothing, really. None of your concern anyway. Weren’t you in a hurry? Go on, then.”

What’s with her? I’m really curious, but now she’s brushing it off. But I am in a hurry, so I ain’t got time for that!



I walked through the forest, my footsteps cautious but steady. *I’m not exaggerating when I say I don’t have any good memories of this place. There was the witch, the game of tag with Professor Yugiri, and even that monster stampede from a dungeon. Honestly, I’d stay the hell away from*

this place if I had a choice. I let out a sigh. What's lying in wait for me this time? Is there a hideous monster or something? I don't think Princess Carina would give me something meaningless though.

I passed the Terminal where I had fought the witch, and I chose to put my faith in the needle of the watch. Very soon, I came across a gray mist.

"No way!" I gasped. "A *Sanctuary* inside the forest? What in the world is hidden inside this place?"

I could easily tell that this watch was a costly magical artifact, and I sensed the power of *Lectrikuhl* infused in it. The Great Spirit of Light had a passion for making magical artifacts, one that could give the Great Spirit of Darkness a run for her money.

What is this thing even for? Since it's enchanted with Lectrikuhl's magic, I'm pretty much bracing myself for just about anything ahead of me. Resolved, I marched on for another few dozens of minutes through the forest.

Until *that* appeared.

I inhaled sharply.

The landscape crumbled, and what used to be a forest was now a colossal wall. I almost couldn't believe my eyes.

Anyone would panic if a ridiculously large wall suddenly appeared before them. *What is this?* I thought in wonder. A towering building rose up from beyond the shroud of the barrier, completely invisible to the naked eye unless up close.

My mind couldn't keep up. The needle on the watch changed colors, indicating that I'd arrived at my destination.

Then, I heard snippets of someone's voice ringing out from inside the building. *Is someone fighting?* I walked around the perimeter of the building and finally found an archway that served as an entrance. Warily, I inched my way inside.

"The witch Francisca is said to have Trichromatic Mystic Eyes. Don't search for her with your eyes—anticipate her in advance by sensing her presence!" someone hollered.

I could sense several humans here, and I gradually made my way towards them until I could see what was happening inside. Just like I had predicted, a great number of people were fighting each other in a great battle of some kind while a storm of fire raged on.

On one side, there were the very familiar faces of recent times: the Royal Knights, the most elite soldiers of the Country of Knights. Meanwhile, the opponents with whom they traded blows, weaving spell after meticulous spell, were...

"All of you, listen up and listen well! The noble knights of Daryth consider us little more than mere warm-up exercises! Let us show them the power we have accumulated on battlefields where the rules

of engagement mean nothing!”

On the other side, a group of mages adorned in crimson capes faced off against the Royal Knights in a fierce contest of strength. They were a band of mercenary mages whose proud achievements spanned over the entire southern half of the continent, never letting the restraints of nations bind them in any way. Have a job? No problem, call upon the first-class mercenary group Dantalion. Their reputation of being willing to do anything as long as it wasn't a crime—anything from war, to dungeon expeditions, and even rescue missions—preceded them.

Taking advantage of their distinguished leadership, however, the knights gradually took down the veteran mercenary band. *What are they even doing? Why would they do mock battles behind closed doors inside a large-scale barrier? Princess Carina told me that once I came here, I'd know all there is to know about what the Royal Knights aim to achieve, so... I decided to observe more.*

“W-Wait! We admit our defeat!” a man yelled.

The knights had easily overpowered the well-known mercenary group, but they had poor prospects against their next opponent, a petite girl. *Wait, is that the Great Spirit of Darkness? Why the hell is she fighting the Royal Knights?! But she was posing as a bystander just a while ago!*

“Do not be intimidated by the title of our enemy! No matter how many legends she has made, she is still a single opponent!” a knight barked.

“This is an extremely precious opportunity! You do not get to have a match with the Great Spirit of Darkness every day!”

But rather than a true fight, it looked more like a drill. The knights evaded sweeping spells and attempted to attack the Great Spirit of Darkness.

This place is so massive that we could shove all the students of Kirsch into here and still have some space left over. So yeah, this would be the ideal place for people who want to run secret combat training drills.

I watched over their skirmishes for a while after that. The knights had downed one expensive elixir after another as they went, and there seemed to be no end to their training. I didn't even need to second-guess which opponent these Royal Knights were preparing for. *This training...will prepare them to tackle that witch.*

“That's right. Those people over there are doing what they can for that inevitable conflict.”

A shiver crawled down my spine at that voice. Somebody was behind me, getting all up in my personal bubble before I'd even realized they were there. I got a nasty fright at the fact that I hadn't

noticed her coming at all.

“Slowe Denning,” she continued. “Peeping is in poor taste, you know?”

“Great Spirit of Darkness,” I said slowly. “Didn’t you say, not that long ago, that you’d stay out of it all and be an observer?”

“Well, I need to earn my keep, at least. But holding back my abilities is pretty tiring.”

The Guardian Knight hadn’t been around during their skirmish, but still, the Great Spirit of Darkness had fought against the Order, and yet she acted as if it had been a picnic. From the very bottom of my heart, I definitely didn’t want to find myself on the other side of the battlefield as her.

She looked at me curiously. “Where did you hear about this place, though? Actually, I don’t even have to guess. The Royal Knights would never tell you, so that princess must’ve been the one. Huh, I thought that girl didn’t have any decent pawns on her side yet, but what do we have here...? At the very least, she sent you here so that she can survive. She’s surprisingly charming and cute, isn’t she? I’ve got to rethink my opinion of her.”

I was about to call out to the Great Spirit when she gently closed her mouth and looked at me without a word. She had silenced me with a single gaze until she finished speaking. “Anyway, do you know what this place is for? Don’t give me a boring answer like ‘an arena for the knights to train in,’ or something like that.”

“It’s the receiving platform of a long-distance teleporter constructed by Lectrikuhl...and, if I had to guess, it’s connected to some place inside the school.”

“Oh? Excellent. So you weren’t just staring slack-jawed at us—you diligently investigated this place too. I see. Okay now, come over here. If the knights discover you, it’s going to get ugly. I’m sure you know that too.”

Those Royal Knights were passionate and determined as heck... They definitely looked like they were planning on felling the witch with their own hands. I’m an outsider now, and if I just waltz in without a care, there’s no way they’ll welcome me with open arms.

I let the Great Spirit of Darkness lead me towards the exit gate that was easily many times our size. I sensed that the drill had resumed behind us and, slightly intrigued about their next opponent, turned back to look, but...

“Huh...?” The arena that I had just been in was gone. Completely gone. In other words, I’d left the confines of the barrier.

After that, we walked a while deep inside the forest, and I faced the Great Spirit after we stopped. On the way here, she had told me

that Daryth as a country had created such a shelter to prepare for the worst. *Why does she even know stuff I don't? That intelligence-gathering ability of hers is a menace, to say the least!*

"Great Spirit of Darkness, I don't understand. What's your goal? Observing our school must be a lie."

"Slowe Denning, this country is quite peaceful, don't you think?"

"Could you please answer my question? I'm serious."

"Your people are ignorant. They'll blindly drink up all the fake, pretty words your queen offers them. According to Fran, Eleanor isn't fit to be the ruler of a country, and I have to admit that I somewhat agree with her. I dunno how much you know, but Eleanor is rather—"

"Great Spirit, please don't bad-mouth our sovereign."

"Huh. You came all this way because the little princess told you to, so I thought you'd take her side, but maybe that's not the case?"

"Who cares about sides or stuff like that? Great Spirit of Darkness, I ask that you answer this one thing. No matter who I asked, your name was never mentioned in recounts of the palace battle. What's with that? Didn't you head to the capital to stop the witch?"

"Oh, wow! You're diving right into this! I thought that you wanted to stay completely out of anything to do with Fran. You had a pretty traumatizing experience thanks to her, after all."

"I only want to know the truth. Nothing more."

That's right. When I heard Sir Dalton and Princess Carina talk about the battle at the palace, I felt that something was off. Neither of them mentioned this spirit at all, despite her heading there with the headmaster and company for that very purpose. If she'd take things seriously, that mere witch wouldn't even stand a chance.

"The thing is, Eleanor told me to keep my hands off because, and I quote, 'This is our problem.'"

"Wait...what?"

"Finding it hard to believe? If that's the case, you're too ignorant about the ruler of your own country. She's that kind of woman, you know. I get why she and Fran don't mesh together at all."

"Are you saying that you're planning on just letting things go the whole time? Seriously?"

"I'm not *that* coldhearted. I'll still gladly hand over info about Fran. It's just that I'm not going to directly do anything about her. But I do think that getting the kids at school involved is wrong, which is why I'm observing the school while I keep an eye out for her." She shrugged. "Our Fran doesn't seem to have any plans on making a move on students, though. Even *she* wouldn't stoop that low."

"Wait, Great Spirit... Are you implying that you know where the witch is?"

"I guess I am. But don't you worry. Fran turned quite a few

soldiers into her puppets at the palace, but I'm serious when I say that there really aren't signs of her doing shady things to the people at school."

I creased my brows. "You think I'd buy that?"

"Now, Slowe Denning. I'll give you the same warning as the Guardian Knight did. You saw what those knights were like in the arena, right? This isn't a matter that you should barge into because you still haven't hardened your resolve."

She's right. The Royal Knights there all had nothing but determination burning in their souls. They are fearless warriors who are willing to do anything for our queen, for Princess Carina, and for the comrades they lost along the way.

"Great Spirit of Darkness... I ask this once again. Which side are you on?"

The words she threw in my direction could be called "friendly" and "amicable" at a glance. However, someone wet behind the ears like me couldn't get a read on her true intentions at all.

"Come now, I don't want you to get the wrong idea. I said that I'd lend my aid if needed, didn't I? That's why you're complaining to the wrong person. If you *do* have something you want to say, well... How about you ask them directly? If you wait here, the people in question will arrive before long!"



Before I had realized, the evening sun had sunk below the horizon, and the forest was now painted over with the cold, inky darkness of night.

Choosing to trust the Great Spirit's words, I had been waiting here for them for a long time. The light had long since vanished, and the Royal Knights training hard had also returned to Kirsch. I'd had a lot to consider, though, so I'd kept relatively busy the whole time I waited.

Falling back into a contemplative silence, I thought back to an encounter I had earlier. During my wait, I had spotted the Great Spirit of Wind, who had returned to nature to fool around, but I chose not to call out to them. I'd been on the edge with an intense spike of nervousness, but for some reason, seeing them made some of the weight lift from my shoulders. *Even though they said they were running away from home, they're probably doing what they can to investigate.*

"Finally...they're here," I muttered to myself as I spotted two silhouettes through the curtain of night.

There were no sounds of footsteps, but it wasn't out of wariness. Rather, it was a subconscious habit. It was probably a technique they both had to acquire due to their identities.

A woman's voice drifted into my ears. "Rudolf, your opinion was that more than half of the candidates would be disqualified during training, but it seems you have been proven wrong."

"It could be one of two possibilities. One, Yugiri had an exceptional eye for talent and chose well. Two, the many crises that struck this school might have spurred growth inside these candidates. It is human nature to become stronger the more someone overcomes life-and-death situations. In any case, Your Majesty, are you sure that you still wish to proceed alone?"

"Yes. We are also doing what we can, but nobody has been able to successfully track that felon's movements. In the end, we have no choice other than to turn to the Great Spirit of Darkness for help."

"There is a chance that she is lying to us, and—"

"But what would she gain from that? We are already in the same boat, and if we sink, she'll sink too. Also, you there. Aren't you tired of this hide-and-seek yet? Show yourself."

Ah, so she noticed me. I revealed myself since the queen had seen right through me, and I spoke up. "It has been a while since we last met, Your Majesty."

There was a hint of amusement in her voice. "Oh, my. You have kept up quite an aloof stance up until now, so what brings you here?"

The corner of the Guardian Knight's mouth twitched. *Looks like I'm not welcome here.*

The queen continued. "In that case, may I presume that you're willing to reconsider taking up my offer of becoming Carina's Guardian Knight? Hmm, but that doesn't seem like the case... Well then, what business do you have with me?"

I ought to have immediately gotten onto my knees when I saw this royal woman, as she deserved a respectful bow from me, at the very least. However, no matter how I reasoned with myself, she wasn't my cup of tea. Unless I really, *really* had to, I wanted to stay very far from her if I could, knowing that this woman had little in the way of human compassion.

"I happened to learn of the truth behind the matter on our hands, and I simply could not stay still," I said humbly.

"Who was the chatterbox who told you that, I wonder? But the fact that you were able to interact with Princess Carina shows that among the Royal Knights, there are a few who would take her side over mine. Rudolf, we have results!"

Here, the knight finally chose to speak. "Yes, I believe it is exactly as you say."

The queen turned to me. "So, on that topic, what did Carina say? I'm hoping this isn't the case, but did she start whining and showing weakness *now* of all times?"

“I am not Princess Carina’s messenger, I am afraid. I am here of my own accord.”

“Or so you say. If you have recently spoken with her directly, however, surely you can understand me. You see, I am regretting how overprotective I’ve been with my daughter up until now.”

“Which is why you would have her serve as bait for the witch?” I accused.

There was a pause as the queen’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Bait? Hah hah, indeed, I can’t argue that. I must admit, I thought you’d show more understanding as someone born to House Denning. This is the last chance I have to give my daughter a trial while I’m queen, after all, and yet... Why would you choose to take her side, I wonder?”

“Because I am her friend.”

The queen’s morals clashed with those of the witch, and I was willing to bet that they had sensed each other’s true natures on sight. However, as someone dragged into all of this, I could only think, *No thank you. Please leave me outta this.*

“The apple indeed doesn’t fall far from the tree, as they say. You are very much like a Denning right now... No wonder the Great Spirit of Darkness wants— Oh my, are you angry? Hmm. You must loathe the fact that you were born a Denning.”

“Your Majesty...” I began slowly. “I beg that you leave out Princess Carina from this battle. This fight is between you and that woman.”

“My daughter is royalty. Isn’t it only natural for her to sacrifice herself for her country?”

“I would not be here if we had no other choice, but that is not the case in reality. If you beseech the Great Spirit of Darkness for her aid, all our problems will be solved immediately!”

It was absolutely pathetic of me to propose handing over our problem to someone else entirely. It was basically declaring that I was completely relinquishing my responsibility over the matter, only willing to sit back and wait for someone to clean up the mess for me instead.

The queen sighed. “I have no idea what you are trying to say.”

Irked, I dropped any and all formalities and barked, “I’m telling you that you shouldn’t involve Princess Carina in a squabble between you and someone else! With how much influence and power you have on your hands, surely you can find many other ways out of this, Your Majesty!”

I didn’t know whether my words would get through to her, but there was nobody else who could speak out like this against the queen. On top of that, if I blew this opportunity, I probably wouldn’t ever have another chance to speak with her directly in private.

“Your Majesty,” I pleaded, “it’s gone far enough already. Please stop being so stubborn!”

Immediately, killing intent manifested from beside the queen. A pure, unadulterated rage seemed to almost explode from the Guardian Knight and crash into my body.

“Slowe Denning...” the man hissed. “Who do you think you are?!”

A strike flashed in the air, rivaling the speed of light. Immediately, my vision was flooded with white. *But I expected the Guardian Knight to attack me when he saw red.* Sir Delfrey was a blind fanatic of the queen who wouldn’t tolerate anyone denouncing her—I was prepared for his attack this time.

Even if he lashes out like this, though, I’m sure that he also knows very well that the only reason there were no casualties inside the palace is because the Great Spirit of Darkness helped.

“Rudolf, do as you see fit. I’ll head over to the Great Spirit of Darkness,” the queen announced.

“Your Majesty! Do you think that I would let you go so easily?!” I yelled. *I might never get to talk to her in person again. I need to figure out what she’s planning, right here, right now!*

“It looks like you have the wrong impression, so let me correct that. This has bloomed into a battle of a scale that will decide the fate of our country. Various countries in the south have already noticed the witch’s presence here, and the truth is that many influential figures have come to our country as reinforcements from such countries. However, if I want the best for our Daryth, we cannot accept their help.”

“Why is that?! What is wrong with just accepting them?!”

“Daryth is the alliance leader of the Great Southern Alliance, and if we are unable to deal with such a trifling matter on our own, we will be a laughingstock. I cannot pass on my crown to my daughter with our country in such a state. This is my task and my duty. I wish to give her a Daryth at its prime, and...it is no concern of mine if you can’t relate to that.”

“Even so, Your Majesty, the way you’re going about it is excessively egotistical!”

“It’s a dog-eat-dog world. That much has never changed throughout the ages. The weak are only prey. That...is the most important principle we learned that day.”

I know that, and she puts that into practice. That was why this woman sought to make Daryth robust even in the anime and ended up leading our faction in the war.

The queen ended our conversation with, “Rudolf, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Sir Delfrey... Just facing him was enough to make my whole life

flash before my eyes like a death god breathing down my neck. Like the witch, this man stood far above my league. Yet I could not—and must not—back down here.

“Sir Delfrey! I’m sure that you’ve realized the truth as well, deep down! At this rate, the relationship between Her Majesty and Princess Carina will be broken beyond repair. This is our last chance to start over!”

The man was not fazed at all. “It is not our place to interfere with the relationship between Her Majesty and Her Highness.”

“Do you feel nothing when you see what will happen?!”

“You speak as if you know everything. You know *nothing* about Her Majesty.”

“Allow me to throw that right back at you. You know nothing about Princess Carina. Her Majesty states that she is acting in Princess Carina’s best interests for her future, but I completely doubt that these intentions have been clearly conveyed to the princess.”

“If the Dustour Empire keeps to themselves, the south will inevitably enter an age of tense competition between several powerful entities. Her Majesty is taking the next few decades into consideration. At a glance, she may seem ruthless, but she indeed only has the best intentions for Princess Carina’s future.”

“But by the time Princess Carina understands Her Majesty’s way of affection, their relationship will be irredeemable!”

“Slowe Denning, you are only able to say whatever you want because *you are not them!*”

I knew that my next words would provoke the Guardian Knight, but some things ought to be said regardless. “A knight who can’t advise their lord has no place at their side!”

“A mere noble dares to insult me... You better be prepared to pay the price for your insolence.”

Within the span of only a second, I constructed over a dozen barriers. The Guardian Knight carved through all of them, and the next thing I knew, a sword was pointed at my heart while my hand gripped it at the last second to prevent its advance. The knight’s bloodlust was insane, but I had no plans of being intimidated so easily.

“A mage without incantations is just a facade... I see that in truth, you are a wandless spellcaster. I have certainly heard that you have survived many harsh battlefields, and your abilities are nothing to laugh at... But you are not so strong that you could save everything and everyone.”

I clenched my jaw. “I don’t need you to tell me that.”

“Not only that, but you still haven’t managed to confront and reconcile with your family, causing you to remain bound by the curse

known as House Denning. You are a person who is even unable to carve out a path to your own future. Tell me, why should I heed the words of such a knave?"

"Sh-Shut up...!"

The man I was at odds with, Rudolf Delfrey, was a knight who had used to be called a wimp, a man who had only become a Royal Knight because of a miracle. *I can't get a hit in at all. What the hell is with this huge gap between us?*

"If you object to Her Majesty's actions, it is simple. You can just protect Her Highness. Am I wrong?"

Darn it. At that condescending lecture, the only thing I could do was clench my teeth in frustration.



I trudged back dejectedly. *Reputation and honor of this country, you say? Hah. She's nothing but a toxic parent who never even stops for a moment to consider her daughter's feelings!*

One thing I'd learned that was unexpected, however, was the fact that news of the witch's invasion had already spread to other countries. Another was the teleportation enchantment on that arena. *Has the Great Spirit of Light already fallen into slumber inside the capital so that they have the greatest chance of successfully performing the teleportation from the cathedral to the arena when it's needed, I wonder?*

"Damn it all," I swore. "Is keeping the position of the alliance leader *that* important?!"

Ugh, crap. I can't stop thinking about it. Yeah, of course, she's making the right decision as queen. I can't even come up with an argument against her sound reasoning, which is the exact reason I'm so endlessly frustrated.

"That goes for me too. Damn it, Slowe..."

I was just as angry towards myself. I was powerless. I was aware that I had done as I pleased for this long thanks to the influence of House Denning, but that didn't work this time because my opponent was the most influential entity in this country. Going against the queen's will was the same as committing treason or starting a rebellion. *If I knew this was going to happen...maybe it would have been easier if I didn't forcefully investigate what was actually going on.*

There was a gasp, and then a long, excited exclamation. "Zat's...! You 'ave finally come back!"

Someone was waiting there at the gates that led to the Kirsch campus. I hadn't told anyone that I had headed out, but there was a student here alone at this time of night, and she was even a *girl*. *Is she waiting for someone?* However, I was very sure this familiar voice had been directed at me.

"Ow dare you toy with my feelings, you scumbag Slowe Denning!"

I completely misjudged you!”

Huh? Me? Did she just call my name?

“What is with that look?! Don’t tell me zat you forgot! You were ze one who invited me to spend time together today after class! All zanks to you, I was never more ’umiliated in my entire life! I will never forgive you!”

“Spend...time together?” I muttered in a stupor. “Huh? Me and you, Lorraine?”

“Yes! I cannot believe you forgot our promise... I was such an idiot for looking forward to today so much! Die, Slowe Denning!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“Oiiink!”

A crisp, loud smack rang through the air as she executed a textbook strike.

I froze in shock. A few seconds later, a numbing sensation crept up, and I came to my senses. *That didn’t hurt at all. What did she just do? Did...she just slap my face?*

“Just because you become a little ’andsome, don’t push your luck! See you never! Hmph!”

I pressed my palm against my cheek, which likely had a hand-shaped welt from the slap, and fell into contemplation. *Oh, right, we promised to go out together again or something. But...today? It was today? Damn, it completely slipped my mind. Oh, spirits... I’m the worst. I’m the most awful scummy pig.*

I got her hopes up, then left her hanging forever. I did the thing I hate most to someone else. It was the rotten cherry on top of the rotten day this had turned out to be...

“Yeah, she’s right. I’m horrible...” I muttered.

Starting off with Sir Dalton’s request, then later being knocked down by the noble Guardian Knight... Today had been a long day.



The rumor mill was already churning about it the next day.

“Hey, have you heard the news? That guy stood Lorraine up! He never showed!”

“Absolutely unforgivable, that Denning. How dare he do such a thing to our sweet Lorraine! Who does he think he is?!”

I think a day like this is what they mean when they say someone wants to spontaneously combust out of shame...

The latest gossip was about how Miss Lorraine dumped the infamous Slowe Denning. It seemed that someone had spotted us, and now *everyone* knew that she had slapped me on the face as hard as she could.

“Look,” a student whispered. “He’s there. Our resident cyclops. He

looks terrible... It's almost as if the apocalypse has happened to him."

"Serves him right for getting cocky. But there's one good thing that's come out of all this. Lorraine managed to stay out of Denning's evil clutches."

It's always the bad rumors that spread the fastest. Damn it, how dare they think this is entertaining! Do they have nothing better to do, honestly?! I'm begging y'all, return to normal and gush about the princess or the queen or something! Also, for your information, douchebags, I don't look so good because of a different reason!

"L-Lord Slowe, I also thought about avoiding the topic for your sake, but I cannot help my curiosity in the end," Valjean said. "What in the world happened?"

"Oh, leave me alone, Valjean. I've made up my mind that I'll be a clam for a while."

"A-A clam...? Where did that come from?"

"Do you know what clams are? You know, those things that shut their shells tight and block out all the stuff they don't want to hear about."

"Ahhh, I see. You mean that you do not wish to hear any rumors relating to that girl. In that case, I shall zip my lip on this matter."

Well, this incident probably seems very scandalous to everyone here, I guess.

And unfortunately, when it rains, it pours, because Valjean then commented, "But it seems that becoming a clam might be impossible, Lord Slowe."

"Why's that?" I muttered impatiently.

"Because you see, Miss Charlotte is over there, and she has the look of a wrathful ogre on her face." He gave me a meaningful glance. "You are going to skip class, right? I shall tell the professor that your chronic stomach illness has shown up again, so don't you worry."

Charlotte brought me to an isolated alley, away from prying eyes, then ordered me to sit on my knees and reflect on my actions. She was *Furious* with a capital F.

"Master Slowe! Come here and sit down on your knees! Immediately! Come on, hurry up! Sit and repent!"

"Yes, ma'am..."

"I've heard all about it! I'm more embarrassed and ashamed than you can ever imagine. I can't even show my face in public now!"

I'd never seen Charlotte so hopping mad like this before. She was so intimidating that I could only obey her orders dejectedly, and so I sat meekly on my knees as she commanded.

"P-Please forgive me, Charlotte!"

"My, my! Even in my wildest dreams, I would have never thought I'd hear such pathetic words from you, Master Slowe! Have you even

spared a single second of thought about your position at school right now? No matter what actually happened, it still doesn't change the fact that there are rumors going around school about how you drove a girl to tears, which is extremely, *extremely* terrible for House Denning! Do you understand, Master Slowe?!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am..."

I couldn't even think of rebutting Charlotte's words; I could only listen obediently on my knees as Charlotte kept going.

"You worked so hard on losing weight by yourself, and I... I was over the moon because I thought that you'd *finally* gained some independence! You've become super handsome and admirable lately, and people's opinions of you at school have changed for the better, and... I was so happy about it all as your retainer, and yet... How could you hit on a girl and mess around just because you started getting a little popular?! Master Slowe, have you no virtue?!"

"I-I'm sorry. But Charlotte, I haven't hit on a girl or anything like that—"

"Acting like you're interested in someone is already out of the question! Surely you know that, as a Denning, you can't start a romantic relationship with just anybody! Do you hear me, Master Slowe?! It's cruel to Lady Alicia if you keep this up too!"

I couldn't even work up the motivation to reply to that because she was right. I couldn't believe I'd let myself get carried away and had promised to meet a second time despite not feeling up to it. And now, thinking back, it was indeed I who'd proposed the second meeting.

During our teatime, Lorraine had been the one who did all the talking, but I couldn't deny the fact that I'd enjoyed myself as well. It wasn't like we had any common hobbies or anything, but just talking about class and school had been enough to make the time fly by.

Also, uh, I don't really know why Charlotte's saying that I'm being cruel to Alicia, but I have a hunch that she'll blow up on me again if I bring it up, so let's not go down that road...

"Master Slowe, you've trimmed down so much that you're almost a completely different person, and you've become a wonderful young man! That's a fact! But now I know *very* well that you might go around stirring a hornet's nest if I leave you on your own! I'll tell Madam Mallow that you made a girl cry, Master Slowe!"

"Ch-Charlotte, please, anything but that! I'm begging you! Pretty please! Just this once!" Desperate, I bowed my head pleadingly.

Mallow was the head maid of House Denning, and in my family, her authority rivaled that of my father. If that old granny found out, she'd drag me right back to House Denning. I'd lose all their trust in me if they heard that I'd been spending my time playing around with

girls... Mallow *hated* that kind of playboy behavior. From what I'd heard, my father used to also fool around a lot when he was younger, which caused him to eat many iron fists, courtesy of Mallow. Perhaps because of that, even now, he always yielded when Mallow had an opinion on something. The old hag knew many secrets about my father that even my mother was oblivious to.

Snorting pathetically, I clung to Charlotte, pleading for her to spare me from such a horrific fate. But after a moment of holding on to her, I realized something: Charlotte was *shaking*.

"Heh... Heh heh..."

Huh? Wait, is she...laughing? "M-Miss Charlotte? Why...are you suddenly laughing?"

Charlotte paused, a lengthy silence dragging on for an unbearable moment. "Just kidding!" she trilled in a singsong voice. "I heard it all from Tina! She told me that she was the one who spurred you on. But, well, you were so tense and cowering so much, I couldn't help myself!"

"Huh?!"

"I think I'm starting to see why Madam Mallow is able to speak so harshly towards the family patriarch."

"Then, all that fuss about telling on me to Mallow was..."

"I wouldn't do such a thing. It wouldn't be of any benefit to you, after all."

"Oh, phew..." I was so relieved that I nearly slumped over flat on the ground from my knees.

"However! You can't change the fact that you ditched someone! Master Slowe, you should be, you know, a little more self-aware! Since you didn't just change in personality but in looks too, it would be bizarre for girls to *not* flock around you! After all, y-you're a Denning!"

Is this what I think it is? Is Charlotte telling me that if I behave well, I'll be a popular guy, so I should get a grip? If that's true, then this isn't a scolding session; it's a pep talk!

But...just one thing. It's not like I want to be popular with everyone and their mothers. Charlotte just isn't getting it, how I feel... Should I just go for it now and confess? I told her a while ago that I had something I wanted to tell her after I lost weight. Yeah, that's right. Haven't I trimmed down enough already? Isn't this enough by now? People call me a cyclops monster because of how muscular I've become, and I can't imagine getting any slimmer than this, so...

Shouldn't I confess right here, right now?

"Charlotte, I know this is a bit abrupt, but could I have a moment of your time...?"

"Trying to divert my attention won't work on me! But fine, I'll

spare you one moment. What is it?"

"Uh, umm, well..."

But I suddenly lost my nerve. *Yeah! Confessing is impossible! I really have to, you know, set the mood proper and all that. How do I put it...the "I'm-gonna-confess-to-you-right-now" mood! I'm not very well versed in it, but surely everyone knows about that kind of romantic mood!*

"What is it? Just tell me!"

"O-Oink..." I whimpered as I took several double takes at Charlotte's face. *I probably look like a gross cyclops when I do that.* After stalling and dawdling, unsure about how to get myself out of this mess, I remembered something and my mouth moved before I could stop to think. "Th-The Great Spirit of Wind told me that you've been spending much more time and effort on your makeup, and...! Well...! Stuff like new perfume on the market! I, uh, just thought that even someone like me could be helpful and give you advice on that!"

"Huh?"

What... What the heck am I... There's no way I could help her with new perfume! But I can't control my mouth! "Even Alicia told me that she wanted to talk about you! Charlotte, are you maybe—"

"M-Master Slowe!" Charlotte's face turned beet red, and she lifted a hand to cover her mouth. "N-No way... S-So you know about how someone gave me a love letter?!"

"Oi...Oink?" Words died in my throat. I must've made an extremely comical face when I sputtered that out as I heard the sound of the world come crashing down around me.

"Oi... Oink... Oioi..." By the end, I was choking and hacking like crazy. I got such a nasty shock that I lost all coherent speech.

But. Wait. There's no way that Charlotte's not popular. Even in the anime, she received mountains of love letters, and in terms of looks, she ranks among the cream of the crop at Kirsch. The only reason everyone hasn't made a move on her so far is simply because she's the infamous Piggy Duke's retainer.

"Oooink! Oi...Oiiink!" I coughed and hacked.

"Master Slowe, are you all right?"

"I-I'm fine, oink. It's just that, I'm a little...shocked out of my life, oink."

"Huh? Wait, did you *not* know?"

"I-I didn't. Alicia only said that you seem to be having a lot of fun lately, so..."

"Wh... Whaaat?!"

"B-But I'm surprised. To think that someone confessed to you..."

"Master Slowe..." Charlotte muttered at length, her voice laced with displeasure. "What do you mean 'surprised'? Do I look that unpopular to you?"

I had the premonition that she might turn into Dark Charlotte, so I hurried to deny that accusation. “Th-That’s not...! It’s the complete opposite, I swear!” I took a deep breath. “To be honest, I... I thought that this day would come around eventually. After all, Charlotte, you’re...even if I put it mildly, you’re way too cute.”

“Huh? I’m— You— *Huh?!?*”

I let out a long, dejected sigh. “Yeah, I should have expected that. There’s no way you could have kept your cuteness hidden forever.”

Someone sent Charlotte a love letter... I used to think that I was the only one who knew how cute she is, but it was only a matter of time before other people noticed too. Only a blind person would miss how adorable Charlotte is. Take me, for example, whose heart she stole the moment I met her and has held on to for over ten years! Still, who in the world dared give a love letter to my dear Charlotte? Ugh... Ughhh... Whatever! I’m not gonna worry about it anymore!

“Um, Master Slowe... Is that really what you think?”

“Huh? Obviously. Why are you asking?”

“O-Oh... I-I made sure to properly reject them, though! Unlike you, Master Slowe, I’m...I’m very loyal, and I only have room in my heart for one person! I didn’t even show any hints of being interested. Do you hear me?!”

I see... So Charlotte’s devoted, huh? But... Ugh, someone help me. I can’t think of anything appropriate to say here! There’s just one thing that I can’t help but be bothered by, though, so I’ll reject that. “Charlotte, I’m the one...who’s more loyal... You might not believe me, but I really am...”

Interlude: The Princess of the White Lily

A lone girl walked under the dimming glow of dusk. A sense of accomplishment radiated from her entire being, and a natural smile tugged at the corners of her lips. She held a textbook in her hand as her silver hair gently fluttered in the breeze.

This was a small, secret pastime of hers—taking a stroll around the campus at night whenever she couldn't concentrate on studying.

A giggle escaped her, and not without reason. She was now a student of Kirsch, just like Slowe. Kirsch Mage Institute was a mage school where the offspring of influential Daryth nobles gathered. Though all these youths were the future of this country, there was a particular one that many often paid special attention to in terms of conduct. His name was Slowe Denning, and she happened to be his personal retainer.

Recently, one of the heaviest burdens weighing on her heart had been lifted, and she was now enjoying life to the fullest. For a while, her heart had ached from stress over hearing the rumor that Slowe had hit on a girl. As his retainer who ought to be his pillar of support, she had been torn by a complicated mix of emotions stemming from embarrassment and self-deprecation. However, now she knew that everything had been a misunderstanding, and her heart felt light as a feather in an invigorating wind.

"I almost can't believe that I'm so relieved just from Master Slowe managing to be ashamed like a normal human being...!"

Up until now, Slowe hadn't cared at all about what others thought of him, but this time, he wanted to know what his reputation was like at school. He had finally begun caring about public opinion at long last—a giant leap towards a bright future for him.

"Who would've thought that he was oblivious to how popular he is at school...? Master Slowe pays way too little attention to things like this! I'm willing to bet that every girl at school would have a field day if he struck up a conversation with them."

Right now, everyone thought that Slowe could make any girl at school fall head over heels for him if he put in the effort. When he had *actually* voluntarily approached one, the whole school had gone wild over the news.

The girl in question, who was rather high on the school hierarchy,

had been ecstatic like no other. For one thing, Slowe was from a powerful noble household, and he himself was a capable mage whom many placed high hopes on. The cherry on top was the fact that he had recently returned to his prodigious self and had a more respectable personality, according to the general consensus.

“But...I got so mad when I heard about how Master Slowe chatted up a girl, and that’s...”

The garden Charlotte was in had been tidied up during Kirsch’s reconstruction, and she sat down on one of the long benches. Looking up, she could see the canvas of the night sky sprinkled with twinkling stars, building up the perfect mood for a couple. It was one of the top five date spots at Kirsch, and the area was practically glowing with that romantic aura, so much so that she began daydreaming. *If only he was sitting next to me right now...*

After a lengthy silence, Charlotte muttered to herself with a sigh, “Yeah. That must be it.”

Admitting it out loud was surprisingly difficult, and Charlotte felt overwhelmed by her swirling emotions. She didn’t think these stemmed from a sort of childish possessive desire, which meant that...

However, Charlotte was a wise girl, so she had decided that she would keep this blooming bud under lock and key. Or at least, that was what she had told herself before, but now...

“He looked so flustered when he heard that I received a love letter. Maybe, just maybe, Master Slowe might...like...”

Thinking back, several signs supported that theory. For one thing, Charlotte was basically a treasure trove of trouble as the princess of a destroyed kingdom, and thus, she began to think, *No one would ever do so much for me unless they had a lot of affection towards me, right?*

It was one of the oldest stories in the books and gossip: a forbidden romance between a master and their retainer.

“I mustn’t let myself be biased and assume the wrong thing... If I’m mistaken, I’d die from embarrassment, but...but...”

Somehow, by pure chance, the retainer had arrived at the truth.

Charlotte’s newfound interest in makeup was, of course, because of her feelings towards Slowe. It was for this reason that she had much less time to keep the Great Spirit of Wind company. They were always on her side, to be fair, but they were too ignorant to the callings of the human heart. Perhaps in another world, they might have discovered Charlotte’s true thoughts and exposed her secret feelings for Slowe, or so Charlotte had feared. In the realm of love, Charlotte couldn’t blindly put her faith in that Great Spirit.

Still sitting on the bench, she muttered to herself, “If it really does turn out to be me overthinking it, I won’t ever be able to walk with my head held high again, but...”

Though she had initially come here to take a break from study, the same thoughts had been plaguing her mind repeatedly for ages now. She had somewhat realized Slowe's affection towards her, but the problem was, what kind of affection was it?

If it was familial love, she'd die of embarrassment, which was why she had indirectly tested him to be sure. She'd also thought that it would be a long battle before she saw results, leading to her current resolution: to work on and improve her own charm! Of course, it would be difficult to reach a level that would make her seem rightful standing next to Slowe, but she was determined to do her best, and thus she studied hard to become worthy of him.

Miraculously, neither of these two had realized that the feeling was actually mutual.

And just as Charlotte's thought process looped again, someone's voice snapped her back to reality as they quietly sat upon the bench. "May I sit here?"

Wait, was someone watching me? I mean, it's not like it's a problem or anything, but...my face feels so hot! Charlotte closed the textbook that she'd left open the whole time. "P-Please go ahead... Oh, but you don't really have to sit next to me. There are plenty of seats available—"

But before she could finish, Charlotte's gaze landed on the newcomer, and her breath left her in an instant. Blonde hair shimmering under the glistening starlight; an inner brilliance that would make everyone's heads turn in the streets, enough to send tremors down one's very soul; a serene aura that made the young woman seem like nothing could fluster her.

"Heya, Charlotte. Studying under the starry sky, eh? Very romantic."

It was the *princess of Daryth*.

"P-Princess Carina! I-I-...! Ah, I shall stand at once! I am so very sorry for my impropriety!"

Out of reflex, Charlotte hurriedly tried to stand up, but she went weak in the knees and failed to stand. Though they were originally of similar status, Charlotte acted absolutely pathetically, and she lamented that for a moment. But Charlotte was a commoner now.

The one who had sat beside Charlotte was none other than the princess of the Country of Knights, the Little Daryth. But the young woman's status wasn't the only reason Charlotte had nearly jumped out of her own skin—she had forgotten one thing because she had her head above the clouds in giddiness, and that was that she had a very good reason to keep her distance from these people.

"A-Are you all right?" Carina looked at her worriedly. "I didn't think I'd surprise you that much."

“U-Um! I-I am sure that you don’t have any business with someone like me, so you must be looking for M-Master Slowe, right?! I shall summon him immediately! I think he is still awake!” Charlotte stood up and brushed the dirt off her skirt.

“No, it’s not Slowe whom I’m looking for. You see, I came here to see *you* today. I heard that you come here at night, so now I’m here.”

“M-Me?!”

“Yes, you. Charlotte, I came here to talk to you.”

Charlotte scanned her surroundings. There were several Royal Knights present, their sharp gazes towards her catching Charlotte off guard. She was just an insignificant girl, so why was the princess of Daryth—

“You know, I was really surprised when I heard from Yugiri that, well, the princess of Huzak was alive.”

Carina spoke in a tone that sounded like lighthearted chitchat, but this was no banter between friends. It was the sorest spot for Charlotte.

“Hu...h?” It was almost as if the entire world tilted around her, leaving Charlotte dizzy and light-headed. A panicked fog clouded her whole vision. This was all too sudden, and she froze in abject shock.



Blood drained from her face, leaving her white as a ghost. *It's all over*, she thought as her life flashed before her eyes. *They found out. My cover is blown.* Only one sound broke the silence, and it was her textbook falling to the ground with an almost solemn thud.

Charlotte gasped. "I-I'm... I'm not...!"

"That's an unseemly sight. You're the complete opposite of Slowe, who always keeps his poker face. Can you really call yourself a Denning retainer?"

"Like I said, I-I'm... I'm not...!"

"You *are*. You are Charlotte Lily Huzak, the Princess of the White Lily and lifelong companion of the Great Spirit of Wind, aren't you?"

Because Charlotte had been over the moon, one fact had completely slipped her mind—the upper echelons of Daryth might have found out her identity. Charlotte could barely make out Princess Carina through her tears. However, Charlotte could not hear what Carina was saying. Her ears refused to process the young woman's words.

If Slowe had been present, things probably would have gone differently. That young man made preparations for all possibilities, and one should expect nothing less from someone once trained as the heir of Duke Denning. If a Royal Knight had been the one to approach them about the topic, Slowe would gauge Charlotte's reaction, and was even prepared to use violence if need be. He had long hardened his resolve. Alas, Charlotte was alone right now.

"H-Hey... Ugh, don't do that. You look as if I'm picking on you or something! Someone! Fetch some water! Kushner, bring over some water! No, not magical water! H-Here, sip that slowly! Slowly, okay?! Or else you'll choke!"

At this point, Charlotte couldn't tell the passage of time at all. She could only wallow in self-pity over how pathetic she was.

"Have you calmed down a bit? It's not good for both of us if you make a fuss, you know." Carina sighed.

Charlotte had finally collected herself, though. She wasn't a toddler; her secret being exposed didn't warrant such an exaggerated reaction. Trying to salvage what little was left of her dignity, Charlotte tightened her hands into fists and once again turned to face Carina, who was sitting right next to her.

Though she faltered a bit, Charlotte still spoke clearly with a sharp and solemn face. "What business...do you have with me?"

And then there was silence, because no matter how much Charlotte tried to act cool, the mood just didn't cooperate with her. Normally, this would be a tense confrontation, but all tension had

been thrown out of the window. She couldn't go back in time and erase all that hiccuping, sobbing, and bawling, after all.

Carina finally collected her wits. "So you're not denying it. Well, I suppose anyone would figure it out if they saw you break down like that, sooo..." She shrugged.

"My deepest apologies for showing you such a shameful sight, but I am fine now."

Charlotte managed to switch up her state of mind. She still had the pride of a former princess. Though the situation had already spiraled out of control, Charlotte was generally a sensible person with a sound mind, unlike Slowe. On top of that, there was still hope. She told herself that even at this point, she could still salvage the situation, and so on and so forth.

Sucking in a deep breath, Charlotte continued, "So, um, may I call Master Slowe over here?" One thing that never changed, however, was how she always relied on Slowe as her pillar of support.

"I think I said this earlier, but Slowe doesn't have anything to do with this. I want to talk to *you*."

Hearing that, Charlotte thought, *Can I really overcome this uphill battle by myself?*

"But on that note... Huh. So Slowe *does* know about it, just as I thought. Or rather, should I say that *only* Slowe knows about it?"

Charlotte was speechless as she inwardly sweated profusely. *I...really don't think I can!* So she did the only thing she could—to prevent herself from spilling the beans, Charlotte instead said nothing at all.

"First things first, relax. Only a shockingly small number of people know about your identity, and there are no plans for anyone else to learn of it in the future. These knights guard their secrets closely, so don't worry. Due to their occupation, they see and hear many bits of information that are rather...complicated. Among all those secrets, there are several that are just as grave as yours."

"Then why are you... What are your demands?"

"Oh, that hurts my feelings. I don't plan on blackmailing you at all, so you don't have to be so wary of me. I only wanted to chat with you."

"A...chat, you say?"

"Yep, trifling banter. No ulterior motives whatsoever. Think about it, who would have ever thought that the princess of Huzak, a destroyed kingdom, would be going to a school in my country? It's pure curiosity talking here. Plus, it's not that absurd for me to want to talk to you, because after all, though our countries are different in size, we started off the same."

Charlotte scrutinized Carina instead of deigning to reply.

“You could at least trust me a little on this, you know? I’m telling you that I’m not going to do anything... Well, I suppose I’ll explain why I revealed your secret here from start to finish, if that helps.” Carina nodded to herself. “Yeah. I think that I have the right to do that.”

“R-Right...? Y-Yes, I suppose so...”

“First up... My dear princess of Huzak, I want to know about your school life.”

“Huh...? My...school life?”

“Yep, your everyday life. What’s on your mind? What do you do? Even the most insignificant stuff is fine. I’ve heard about how you’ve started showing up in classes recently, so I want to hear all about it.”

Carina’s abrupt questioning was a bolt from the blue. It seemed that the princess of Daryth desired only to know about Charlotte’s school life, but Charlotte didn’t think that such a thing was worth the royal princess’s attention.

“Charlotte,” Carina said slowly, “when I came to this school a while ago, a certain thought occurred to me: it would be so fun if I got the chance to be independent from my family and spend time with people my age. But someone in our position could never do that. There is an exception called Princess Alicia, but that girl’s special. That’s why I wanted to hear about it from you, who was once similar to me, because...this is a life I will never experience.”

Ever so slightly, those words struck a chord with Charlotte. At Kirsch, students like Slowe and Alicia were the stars of the show. People like maids and retainers—people like her—worked behind the scenes to support these lead actors.

And so, Charlotte spoke in depth about what she could, pouring out her soul to Princess Carina. Her everyday life, the memories she made, the textbooks with her scrawling all over the pages, how Slowe went on a date with a girl, as well as how she’d recently received a love letter.

The only thing on Charlotte’s mind was finding a way to wriggle herself out of this situation, and fast. Accordingly, the tales she narrated were as jam-packed with information as the reports about Slowe at school that she had sent to House Denning. Princess Carina listened attentively, but her eyes clearly lit up and she leaned forward in interest whenever romance was brought up.

“Really?! A love letter? I thought those only existed in books! So they’re not just fiction?!”

A knight interrupted the conversation. “Your Highness, please lower your voice.”

Carina glared at him for a moment. “Kushner, we’re at the juiciest part right now, so shush!”

A suspicion began nagging at Charlotte. The girl known as Carina was thirsty for things from the outside world. Due to their similar status, Carina might have yearned for a normal teenage school life. Charlotte remembered how Carina locked herself in her room for days on end at first during her previous visit. Charlotte decided that she would share lots of fun things with this fellow princess.

Slowly, Charlotte forgot her initial wariness, and she began thinking that maybe they could laugh together and empathize with each other, eventually even becoming friends. That was when one thing started bothering her. “Um, Princess Carina, I know I should have asked this way earlier, but...why are you asking me all this?”

No matter how hard Charlotte thought about it, she didn’t get it. Why did Carina approach her in such a roundabout way? Even if they had to keep out of sight, there were much better ways of achieving privacy.

“Ah, that. That’s because I might die very soon.”

“Your Highness, you must not speak of that!” one of the knights standing on guard warned. But Carina didn’t seem to be fazed at all.

With a sense of jaded acceptance in her tone, Carina turned to the knight and said, “Charlotte won’t tell anyone. That’s the kind of person she is. Now then.” Turning back to Charlotte, she continued, “I’ve also told some of it to Slowe, but just for you...I’ll tell you a secret that I haven’t even told him yet.”

“Princess Carina...! Forgive me, but that is going too far!” the knight cried.

With a small chuckle, the princess of Daryth smiled. “Charlotte, I made a promise with my mother. In exchange for keeping your secret under wraps, I’ll tell you mine—I’m to become bait for Francisca, the witch of the Dustour Empire.”

For a moment, Charlotte forgot how to breathe.



“I’ve shared some information with Slowe, but from the looks of it, he hasn’t told you anything, huh? That’s so nice. I’m jealous. Have you been blissfully ignorant all this time while he protects you under his wing like this? In that case, I’ll tell you all about it—all about what happened to me.”

The intruder from the Dustour Empire was fresh in Charlotte’s mind. She thought back to that dreadful day when the witch had manipulated Professor Yugiri like a puppet. Charlotte had assumed that the woman had gone to the capital with the Great Spirit of Darkness and other staff, and that she wouldn’t have any more encounters with that infiltrator.

“The witch is still alive, and she deeply resents my mother. They

are both going all out against each other, and only one of them will make it out alive while the other lies dead. Coexistence is impossible.”

However, Carina told Charlotte why she had come to Kirsch, shattering Charlotte’s assumptions by saying that the fight with the witch was still a current affair. Carina recounted the fierce battle at the royal palace, then explained how the queen and the Royal Knights were planning on confronting the witch fully prepared this time and vanquishing her.

Then...

Carina continued. “And so, the witch has set her sights on me in an attempt to make my mother yield completely. You know, when I heard about that, I thought that this might be my chance to repay my debt to Slowe.”

...Carina told Charlotte about how she had made a direct appeal to the queen that she was willing to become a hostage only if the queen guarded Charlotte’s identity in exchange. This last fact was a secret that Carina hadn’t even shared with Slowe.

“Charlotte, my mother’s original plans were something along these lines: after dealing with the witch, she would immediately win you over, and she fully planned on squeezing every last drop of worth out of you. But Charlotte, just like I promised earlier, we won’t harm you.”

Hearing this had taken Charlotte by surprise, because she was a convenient tool to be used as a cause to rally troops and recapture Huzak. Furthermore, she would also be useful for strengthening Daryth’s influence in the south.

“I would provide a bargain that far outweighed letting you off the hook, which was why I promised my mother I’d become bait to lure out the witch.”

“Th-That is very dangerous, Princess Carina!”

“You’re right. Even I think I’m a hopeless fool, but that’s the exact reason my mother...why Queen Eleanor Daryth decided that it was a worthwhile exchange, you know? She’s always going on and on about how she wanted me to be brave and heroic, like how she was in her youth.”

When these words left Carina’s mouth, she seemed like a completely different person from the one who had listened to Charlotte’s stories with delight.

It was deathly dangerous to throw oneself before the feet of the peerless witch who had brainwashed Yugiri, much less do so voluntarily. Charlotte had been there with the puppet professor, and she never, *ever* wanted to repeat that experience, but now, Carina was marching into it headfirst.

“Princess Carina, why...why are you willing to go so far for my

sake?"

"Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not doing this for you. I'm the princess of this country, and I owe Slowe a huge debt for saving this school. Since Slowe is set on protecting you, going along with his wish would be a way of repaying him. It's only natural that I ended up at such a conclusion."

"But...are you not scared, Princess Carina?"

"I am. I witnessed the battle between her and the knights in the palace. I...will never forget that day for the rest of my life."

"Then...!"

Carina hesitated. "Remember those stories about school you just told me? To me, they were priceless and sacred. If Slowe hadn't been around, all of that would be gone, and... Just thinking about it makes me want to repay Slowe."

Charlotte felt like a prisoner in her own body. This conversation was about a world that she had never even tried to learn about. Even in her wildest dreams, she had never thought that the royalty and knights at Kirsch, whom she had been avoiding, would try to *protect* her.

"But don't get the wrong impression. You might think that I'm really kind, but that's not the case at all. It's just that when I saw you by chance, you seemed so happy that I couldn't help but itch to do something mean to you. I actually didn't plan on telling you anything at all, at first."

The princess of Daryth chuckled, and just like the knights with their heads bowed, Charlotte was frozen to the spot, as if she had been bewitched.

"And with that, my last regret is gone! Even if I end up dead, it means that someone else knows I went down protecting someone. With this...I'll be able to leave with my head held high, taking pride in the fact that I was able to be a proper princess while alive."

During Carina's previous visit, Charlotte had gone into a dungeon with this princess. Carina had knights protecting her, but even ignoring that, she had outclassed Charlotte in every aspect, whether it be magic or bravery. Though the princess seemed to speak very lowly of herself, Charlotte never felt that Carina was unworthy of her title.

"Well then, I suppose it is time to bid you farewell, blessed princess of Huzak. I wish I could have led a life like yours...as if that were possible."

Carina stuck out her tongue before walking off into the night, but her parting words echoed in Charlotte's ears.

Charlotte lost track of how much time passed after that. The overwhelming amount of information left her dumbfounded. First, her

identity had been exposed, and then she had been told that it wouldn't be made public, which meant that she could continue leading a normal life. Could she really trust Carina?

One thing she knew, however, was that she definitely wouldn't get a wink of sleep that night. This distress would last well into the morning. Being giddy about Slowe seemed so long ago now. Charlotte noticed the textbook that still lay on the ground. Hurriedly, she reached out to pick it up, but someone beat her to the punch.

Lifting her head, she realized it was a knight; one of Carina's escorts, no less.

"I...apologize for that," the man said, with a grim look remaining plastered onto his face. "Her Highness has been experiencing emotional fluctuations these past few days."

Sir Kushner was his name, and if Charlotte remembered correctly, he was the only Royal Knight who had received a girl as his trainee. Charlotte remembered how the girls at school had squealed and screamed especially loudly about him.

His usual amiable face was nowhere to be found now, and he continued on. "She is especially sensitive right now. If possible, please pretend nothing just happened. Princess Charlotte—no, pardon my mistake, Miss Retainer."

He was heartbreaking to watch.

"Her Highness was very moved by your relationship with Slowe Denning. We have no means of knowing the past between you two, but you both must have shed an unimaginable amount of blood, sweat, and tears. Living quietly just like you always have is a respectable path in itself. At the very least, I agree with Her Highness in that regard."

Charlotte looked at the knight in silence.

"However, Her Highness is not the most tactful sometimes. In the unlikely event that Her Highness suffers a mishap, you might discover the truth one day and live to regret it, which is what led her to speak maliciously in an effort to garner your scorn. When Her Highness made the proposal to Her Majesty, she did it with full intention and determination to protect you, Miss Retainer."

The knight frantically explained that Carina hadn't meant what she said earlier when she spoke harshly. But Charlotte had never thought the princess spiteful to begin with; in fact, she thought the exact opposite. "Um, it's okay, you do not have to go on. Princess Carina's feelings came across painfully clear."

After all, in Charlotte's eyes, the princess had seemed overjoyed during their conversation earlier. Carina has said that she was jealous of Charlotte, and that hadn't been a lie. From her expression, Charlotte could tell that Carina meant those words, because once upon

a time, Charlotte herself had been jealous of the students at school who could take classes in the same classroom as Slowe. Magic had been beyond her back then, but now, she had finally managed to cross over to the other side.

Princess Carina is the same, she thought. She's a princess just like me, and she just can't tolerate the fact that I've crossed over into normalcy while she's still alone there in the confines of royalty.

“Um, Sir Kushner, was it? There is something I wish to ask of you...”

“What do you mean by that...?”

“That is, well... May I ask you to tell me all kinds of things?”

The Princess of the White Lily realized something: because of their similarities, there was a future where they could become friends.

Chapter 4: Revelations Are Always Abrupt

“Oooink...!” I wailed in pain.

I had a horrible, horrible nightmare. In it, another man passionately pursued Charlotte, and she left me behind. This dream had actually plagued me for three consecutive days. On the first day, I saw Charlotte getting along happily with a stranger. On the second, I witnessed the incriminating moment when they held hands. On the third, I... *Aaah!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

I must be having these because of “the Incident” I heard from her a while ago. That must be the root of the issue. The one thing I feared most has finally come to pass...

“I guess I’ll name that day the Charlotte Love Letter Incident...”

I buried my face in my hands. The crushing despair drove any and all thoughts from my mind. My face must’ve been an unseemly sight.

Sweat trickled down endlessly. *Charlotte’s cuteness has finally been dragged out into the open for everyone to notice...*

This had all started because the world was at peace now. It was also because I’d been single-mindedly building my muscles, causing me to neglect Charlotte. *Speaking of which, the Great Spirit of Wind also said that Charlotte, for some reason, has started paying attention to fashion and makeup lately...even though she doesn’t have to! She’s already cute enough even if she doesn’t do any of that!*

“Look at me, I’m so distraught...” I snorted self-deprecatingly. “I’m so pathetic.”

Splashing water onto my face, I washed up and wiped away my lingering drowsiness. After that nightmare, I couldn’t work up any motivation to go back to sleep. In the back of my mind, the days I spent with her played on like a film. *What the heck is this? It almost feels like I’m seeing my daughter off because her wedding is near. I mean, I’ve never experienced fatherhood, but still.*

“No... I can’t let this go on. At this rate, I won’t be able to leave my room again today.”

I had already wallowed in bed like this for several days. From time to time, Charlotte would deliver necessities and nourishing food, but I had requested her to stop because she had a mountain of schoolwork.

For the foreseeable future, I would probably be constantly

weighed down by my anxiety over Charlotte possibly being won over by some other man. I needed to come up with a plan. *But what could I do? Ask her to stay inside the entire day, every day?*

"Oh, right. At times like this...exercising is the best answer!"

My savior, Lady Tina, had told me that moving around and building my muscles was the best solution at times like this, and she was never wrong.

I howled. "Oooink!!!!!!" Perhaps my cyclops roar expressed my sorrow.

That's right. Charlotte said that she got to know the love letter guy in class. Okay, maybe the best strategy is decreasing her chances of encountering other men after all.

That's an awesome idea...isn't it?

"Oooooiinnnnkkk!!!!!!!"

No... No. I can't do something like that. I began feeling self-loathing over how intolerant and immature I was as an individual. *For the very first time, Charlotte has chosen to put on makeup, and she's having the time of her life at school right now. How could I even think about getting in the way of her happiness?*

But... Meanwhile, I'm in this area they call the slaughterhouse and mimicking a cyclops by myself... While I silently exercise and sweat, Charlotte is going to depart to a distant world... What have I been doing up until now?! There are more important things than dead lifts in life! You're such an idiot, Slooowe!!!!!!!!!!

I let out a despairing wail at the thought. *That isn't the only problem on my hands. I haven't been able to meet with Princess Carina since the day I found that giant arena in the forest either, because for some reason, my guide Sir Dalton hasn't contacted me! I need a Royal Knight to lead me if I want to get through the Sanctuary spell. Sir Dalton mentioned that it had been the last opportunity he had to guide me inside.*

I'm stuck. Hindsight tells me that I should have tried to obtain more useful information.

"Who would have thought...? I never knew I was so weak and pathetic. Hah hah, darn. I can't even work up an appetite."

The princess probably thinks I'm a coward who chickened out. She placed her faith in me, and yet...

I know it. I can easily tell that I need to get her out of that place somehow, but... The Charlotte Love Letter Incident has been such a devastating blow that I haven't had any room to allow my brain to function. And while I "merrily" waste time dallying around, that certain day draws ever closer.

Frankly, the past few days have been the most painful time I've ever experienced since I changed for good. I never, ever thought that Charlotte

would receive a love letter.

"It almost sounds like a joke. I was able to trim down immediately after someone confessed to Charlotte... Hah," I whimpered, "I bet everyone at school is laughing at me... Haaah... I've gone off the deep end..."

But maybe it was inevitable. In the anime, the blackhearted Piggy Duke desperately tried to protect Charlotte behind the scenes, but Shuya stole her away from right under his nose. Of course, that redhead isn't that kind of guy right now. Shuya the Hero is nowhere to be found. But...there are signs of him. After all, that guy was chosen as a candidate for the Royal Knights.

My eyes widened as I spotted something in my vision. "Ah..."

Charlotte was walking with a girl. They held the same textbooks, so they were probably classmates.

I wanted to join them...to become a part of Charlotte's everyday life. However, even if I took the same lessons as Charlotte, I wouldn't gain much from them...

A gloomy, inky cloud hung over me. *Darn it, this isn't a good sign. Get a grip, Slowe Denning. You have more pressing matters right now, don't you?*

"Exactly... The witch might already be inside the campus, remember...?"

The Royal Knights were making such grandiose preparations for the battle with Francisca, and perhaps that woman had already infiltrated Kirsch. At that thought, on instinct, my movements turned somewhat stiffer and more nervous.



"Don't you think Princess Carina looks really worn out?" one student whispered. "Wasn't the Prayer Ceremony only meant to be a ritual where she expresses her resolution to become queen?"

"Well, it's probably one of the biggest events in her life, so I'm honestly not surprised. I bet she can't even stomach any food right now."

Princess Carina was there, surrounded by a cabal of Royal Knights in a tight-knit formation, and she didn't look so good.

The Prayer Ceremony *was* meant to be the first step forward onto the path of her coronation, but in truth, it was a lure for the witch. She had to confront the witch all alone; considering the amount of anxiety she must have, it was only natural that she looked so haggard.

I know about what the queen and the knights are scheming, but...do I really have the right to butt in? The worst possibility is me getting involved, putting a damper on their plans, and messing everything up. They've made extensive preparations to combat the witch this time, and I'm sure that they have plans that I'm not privy to. Is it really right for me to barge in and

destroy all of that?

“Shuya, you’re not half bad!” a man exclaimed with a boisterous voice. “While I did have the urge to beat you to death when you talked back to the queen, who would’ve guessed that you could actually manage to keep up with me until the end? Now, I can’t say for certain, but I think you’ve probably improved the most!”

“That is because you are so amazing at teaching, Mister Grantz!” a cheerful voice rang out clear amongst the din. “Having someone from the Order coach me privately is the opportunity of a lifetime! And I am very sorry about the trouble I caused you on that occasion!”

The man barked out a hearty laugh. “Very true! We haven’t yet retired, so we have very few chances to train students such as yourself. Pretty much only Yugiri had that chance, since her mission here was to observe. Anyway, Shuya, you can hold your head up high. Our initial estimate was that fewer than half of the candidates would make it through, but in the end, everyone endured! And out of all of them, Shuya, you have the most promise!”

This voice is...oh, it's him. Shuya Newkern, the brimming-with-confidence anime protagonist. Whispers about how he probably has a bright future ahead of him have started going around school lately. Even I was bewildered by his change and his increasingly prominent presence at school.

The knight puffed up his chest. “Shuya, you *must* join the Order in the future. I, Grantz, will endorse you, so you’d better!”

“Th-Thank you so much! I will put my heart into it and do my best!”

The kid who’d apparently received intensive coaching from a Royal Knight practically glowed from the praise. I sighed inwardly. *The kind of worries that weigh on my mind would probably never be a problem for him. Actually, this guy is the root of all my trauma about Charlotte being stolen away from me!* I felt a small spike of ire rise at the mere thought.

“Oh, it’s you, Denning,” he muttered. “Why are you just standing there?” Shuya paused as he turned to his coach. “Sorry, Mister Grantz, may I have a moment to talk to him? There is something I wish to tell him.”

“Hm? I don’t mind at all, but... Huh. So *this* guy is the famous...” The man trailed off.

“What do you want, Shuya?” I hissed. “I have nothing to talk about. Not with you, at least.”

You know, Shuya somehow always... I just had this thought, but the big shots always seem to take a liking to him. Even in Zenelaus, the high-ranking adventurer Archflare approved of him, and Professor Yugiri also praised him at every turn. Is this guy a social butterfly or something? Or,

well, he's good at getting people to fawn over him, I guess. Anyway, hmm... This Royal Knight is sparkling and glowing just as much as Shuya. Well, he has red hair too, so, yeah.

"Hey, Denning, don't you think you're playing around way too much? I heard all about it... About how you nastily dumped Lorraine and how she sent you flying!"

Ugh, so even Shuya has heard about it? But I wasn't sent flying, for your information. I only got a slap on the face.

Not waiting for a reply, he continued. "Right now, people are dragging your reputation through the mud. I'm sure you know about how everyone loves sweet little Lorraine, right? Even I was interested in her for a while, so you bet I've heard many people cursing you and calling you unforgivable."

I stared flatly at him.

"Shuya, don't scold him so. In my opinion, I think more students should act like this guy, you know?" the knight commented. "Oh boy, when I was a student, I constantly went from one girl to another. If you want to become a big name in the future, you should get a girlfriend or two, just like this guy!"

Hey, Mister Royal Knight over there, don't say such a thing to Shuya! He has hidden talent in that field, ya know? He might actually do it if you tell him! His criminal record tells it all.

One thing, though. These two... "May I ask you something? Why are you two so close?"

"Well, I spent these past few weeks keeping close and thoroughly whipping him into shape, so it was inevitable. More importantly, Slowe Denning, that reminds me. This is a good opportunity for me to tell you something. Shuya, leave us be for a while."

Grantz didn't need to ask Shuya twice. "Yes, sir!" he said before he distanced himself from us. True to his word, he didn't seem to be eavesdropping at all.

Oh wow, he's got the chain of command drilled into him. That knight wasn't kidding about their training.

Sir Grantz, who seemed to subscribe to a strict pecking order, had grinned joyously at Shuya, but in contrast... When he laid his eyes on me this time, they were dark, and they held no warmth nor the semblance of a smile. It was like he had almost become a completely different person.

"Slowe Denning. I don't know what you learned, but don't interfere. If you get any closer, I'll kill you."

"Wow, you have two completely different faces. You are a remarkable actor, Sir Grantz of the Evening Chime."

I wasn't the type to let this guy intimidate me with his evident threat. I stifled a laugh. *But it's really curious how I got so energetic*

instead when faced with this much open hostility. Actually, wasn't this guy one of the fighters training in the arena? Since he gets along with Shuya, he's likely a die-hard warrior who talks best with his fists.

We glared at each other. It probably wasn't any more than ten seconds, if anyone had timed us. But even without words, I clearly understood what this man meant.

Perhaps Sir Grantz noticed that I got the message, because before I knew it, he called out to Shuya, who lingered around fifty steps away. "Shuya, I'm done over here! Sorry about the sudden interruption."

"That two-faced switch is remarkable, indeed..." I muttered.

"Did you say something?" the man said with a cocked eyebrow.

"No, nothing at all..."

I nearly laughed again at how differently he treated Shuya and me, but after I saw Shuya returning with the same refreshing, charming aura as Sir Grantz, I didn't even have it in me to be jealous.

Sir Grantz left shortly thereafter, but not before he emphasized to me that I mustn't forget what he had just said.

"Oi, Denning. What did Mister Grantz say to you? Did you stir up trouble again?"

"Nothing major. Anyway, Shuya, how's Princess Carina doing lately? You're, uh, one of the candidates, so you get to meet her sometimes at those parties of yours, right?"

"You've got to be kidding me... Denning, do you *still* have your sights on Princess Carina? So that's why Mister Grantz looked so frightening. You never know when to give up."

"Oh, leave me alone. So? Have you seen Princess Carina lately?"

"The Prayer Ceremony is coming up soon, as you know. Maybe because of that, she hasn't turned up to those parties lately. On that note, those aren't really parties, to be honest... Ah, but that one time... Like what Mister Grantz said earlier, our training is finally over, and there was a victory banquet. You with me so far? Princess Carina showed up for a very brief moment then. She looked really bummed at the time, but she did say one thing."

Right, the Royal Knight did say that the chosen students have formally completed their intensive course. "If it's okay with you...could you tell me what she said?"

"Make sure you don't tell anybody else! Princess Carina looked really serious, so... Okay, I get it. I won't keep you hanging, so don't make such a scary face, Denning! Uh, Princess Carina only mentioned one thing. She said that we shouldn't take her mother's words or her trials to heart."

"The queen's trials? Did you guys receive trials of your own?"

"Yeah, I guess. But this was all really momentous stuff. We already have our hands full with our everyday lives now, but some of

the trials are things that we can't accomplish unless we can imagine what we will be like in ten years. Though...how do I put it? I can't help myself from itching to challenge myself with it. Think about it, Denning—the current Guardian Knight only got that strong because he continuously conquered the queen's tasks, right? It's everyone's dream.”

The queen's trial... To Princess Carina, that meant that she had to confront the witch alone. “Shuya, I want your opinion on this. After your experience at that party, what was your impression of the queen?”

“Of Her Majesty?”

Princess Carina would be performing the Prayer Ceremony in a few days' time. She had to lock herself up inside the cathedral for an entire night on her lonesome. This was a golden opportunity for the witch who wanted to take her hostage that would never arise again.

To top it all off, the queen had announced that she would withdraw all the Royal Knights from Kirsch on the night of the princess's prayer. *Maybe...that's why the Royal Knights are so on edge, like Sir Grantz was earlier.*

Shuya hummed. “Well...”

It sounded rich, coming from me, but Shuya was a sharp guy. I could count on his insight.

“I had absolutely no idea what she was thinking, and she probably doesn't even remember my name anymore, but...” He trailed off.

“But?”

“Her Majesty is terrifying when she talks. I don't know how to describe it. Her words are like knives that can gouge out your innards. She'd make me start questioning myself and make me think, ‘Am I really fine as I am now?’ The trials she gave us were also, well... I guess you could call them unrealistic... But when she speaks, I feel as if I'd definitely grow as a person if I manage to accomplish them.”

My eyebrows knitted together as I listened to him talk.

“Her Majesty has probably realized many otherwise crazy dreams up until now. That's probably why she practically radiates confidence. I pity Princess Carina a little.”

“Pity? Why?”

“It's kinda obvious, once you imagine the queen as your own mother. Think about it, Denning. Your mother was someone who went down in history, right? You'd be compelled to feel that you must follow in her footsteps, and...be crushed under the pressure. Even if we take the entire history of Daryth into account, Queen Eleanor still stands out in her brilliance, so I guess I feel a little sorry for Princess Carina. Welp, it's a foreign world to me. I probably would never have anything to do with it all, but... Hm? What's with that frown on your

face, Denning?”

“Yeah...” I muttered slowly to myself. “I think so too.”

“Lord Slowe, why did you suddenly stop in the middle of the path? Did you clam up again?”

“Nah, that’s not it, Valjean, I’m just...” *...deeply moved by Shuya’s words, that’s all.*

Even if she spent her whole lifetime trying, Carina Little Daryth would probably never reach the heights that our current queen had achieved. I knew it wasn’t a competition, and they shouldn’t be compared, but Eleanor Daryth was just too qualified to be a ruler of a country. It was probably also only thanks to her that Daryth was at the core of the alliance of the four major powers of the south.

“Hm? Lord Slowe, are you possibly going to miss the next class as well?”

“Sorry, Valjean, I’m not feeling so good, so I’m not going. But, well, that goes for you too, right?”

“Yes. After all, I am rather short on time.”

“Is Sir Dalton strict?”

“He is. He is way too strict. However, he is willing to take time out to coach me despite being busy with his own work, and... I have you to thank, Lord Slowe, for referring such a knight to me. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“No big deal. Sir Dalton looked like he had plenty of free time on his hands, plus we’re friends, remember? You’re probably the only one who doesn’t call me names like Mister Cyclops. If I see a friend in need, we ought to help each other, right?”

Folklore said that lions threw their cubs off cliffs, only rearing the ones that could endure such an ordeal. Similarly, some parents believed that a child could only become respectable after such struggles, but Princess Carina wasn’t a warrior. This trial was too ill-suited for the queen to give to her daughter, and I highly doubted that the princess could make it through.

From the looks of the queen in the forest, though, tackling her directly was probably just a waste of time. She wouldn’t change her mind just because someone like me spoke out against her. On top of that, the Guardian Knight, as well as the Order inside the arena, all burned with determination to kill that witch, and they’d already set their plans in motion. These people likely wouldn’t regret it at all if Princess Carina ended up a casualty of the mission.

“Lord Slowe... I know it sounds strange coming from me, but are you *really* Lord Slowe?”

“What the heck? Anyway, if you truly do become a Royal Knight one day, be sure to give me a helping hand.”

“Leave it to me. I shall rush over no matter what the occasion is. This, I swear to you.”

“I hear you loud and clear. I’m counting on you, so grow into a man that will surpass Shuya, all right?”

I didn’t have any qualms about skipping class. *Am I irresponsible? Yeah, sounds about right. But I can’t help it because there’s something more important to do right now.*

“Do I sneak into the girls’ dorms...? No, I’m not skilled enough to break through the *Sanctuary*,” I muttered under my breath. “What should I do, then?”

Actually, I have a nagging question on my mind: why did the queen look as if everything was under control? The possibility of her own defeat didn’t seem to cross her mind at all, as if she didn’t even spare one thought to a future where she loses. Jeez, isn’t she putting too much faith in the Order? This is an all-hands-on-deck situation, so she should also borrow the aid of her former enemy, since they’re available!

Maybe it’s just like I suspected and flaunting Daryth’s power in front of the Great Spirit of Darkness is her goal. Sheesh, what a mother you’ve got, Princess Carina.

“What do I do? Threaten a knight and tell them to bring me over to where Princess Carina is...? Hah, Slowe, are you an idiot? That’s going to cause major mayhem. Ugh, my brain isn’t working right now...”

I had sought out information from Sir Dalton and other Royal Knights I was on relatively good terms with, but they had all refused.

There was one exception, though; the Flower Knight Oliver, whom I had gotten to know in Yoram, had shed a little light on things. He’d told me that this was a battle to avenge their fallen comrades, and that...the Knight Commander, Cardinal Maldini, could no longer return to his post as a knight, which was why the Order had to prove themselves to him. They had to show him that they were still perfectly fine without their commander.

After hearing this, it had all clicked together. *So the cardinal really did get injured during the fight in the capital, I’d thought. No wonder the knights are so stubborn.*

Walking around Kirsch’s campus, I hadn’t found any traces of the witch, but I was pretty confident that she was lurking around somewhere incognito. *But...she hasn’t left any signs pointing to her, unlike No Face.* Of course, I knew that the opponent I was facing this time was above my league, but I couldn’t help but feel frustrated. *There’s such a large gap between us...*

“I can’t find *anything*...” I grumbled before I spotted someone. “Oh.”

It was the girl I had promised an outing but had let down. *This is pretty awkward, but I was the one at fault. One should never make a promise they can't keep...*

I decided to take the initiative. "I'm sorry about not showing up last time."

"Oh, you don't 'ave to! I-I also wanted to apologize to you, Lord Denning! I'm so sorry for getting too excited about it all wizout considering your feelings! Zinking back now, I did something extremely shameful..."

"No, the fault all lies with me. On top of that, someone who forgets about a promised meeting is trash."

According to Shuya, there were several exaggerated rumors speculating the relationship between Miss Lorraine and me. However, it was all my fault; I was getting my just deserts. *I've resigned myself to shouldering the blame.*

"U-Um! Zere is one thing I want to ask you, Lord Denning... Do you possibly! Already! 'Ave...'ave someone special in your 'eart? May I ask for details?"

"Huh? Uh, not sure about that... Probably not?"

That's a lie. Only one person comes to mind...a person who has never, ever budged from the softest corner of my heart, and likely never will in the future either.

I'm sure that I'll get to meet all kinds of people from now on, and among them, there will definitely be people just as cute as she is. But...for some reason, I can't even imagine myself liking anyone else.

Just hearing the fact that she received a love letter was impactful enough to keep me sick in bed for several days. I...honestly can't see myself ever investing as much of my soul into someone else for the rest of my life.

"I zink I am a little jealous of zat person," Lorraine said slowly.

"Wha—"

"I'm just guessing 'ere, but you probably didn't approach me for any special reason... It didn't 'ave to be me; anyone would 'ave done ze job. I was only chosen because of one zing—I was nearby at ze time! I am right, aren't I?"

She was completely right. I hadn't cared about who I'd talked to.

She narrowed her eyes. "I zink zat reaction is a little too 'onest. My pride is in shreds, you know?"

"...Sorry."

"No, it's not a big deal. I 'ad ze feeling zat was the case. I mean, our paths 'adn't crossed at all until zen, so frankly, I 'ad my suspicions... Well, it looks like I've been dumped, but you should be careful. Zere are a lot of people after you, Lord Denning! Ah, but is zere ze chance zat you might get back together with Lady Alicia?"

Why are girls attracted to gossip about love like bees to honey? I wondered.

After we talked it out, Lorraine made me sit through a very, *very* long interrogation with her. It was out of guilt that I went along with it until she was satisfied, but man, I was dead tired!

Lorraine Tronesia. That was Lorraine's full name, and I had only learned of it in our conversation moments ago. I was appalled at myself. I had known nothing about the girl I had invited out on a date. *Charlotte was right. I got too carried away.*

A voice called out to me. "What's with the weary face? It's not like her talkative nature is new or anything."

"Alicia... Don't read my mind, okay? Wait, you were watching us? Sheesh, what a great choice of hobbies you have there."

"I wasn't your only audience, you know? There were a bunch of other girls watching you two. Maybe that rumor might surface again. That girl looked like she might be aware of that fact too, though. Slowe, that little lady is way tougher than you think."

"Oh, yikes..."

"You were oblivious, huh? But hey, why did you pick her? Well, I'm willing to bet that you didn't have a good reason. She probably just caught your eye or something." Alicia shrugged.

The issue was that she was right on target. Was I that easy to read?

"But the likes of Lorraine could never become your partner. For better or worse, that girl is normal. If someone wants to be your companion in life, they need to be just as wild as Miss Charlotte is, if not more."

"Excuse me? Did you just call Charlotte wild?"

"You didn't realize? Miss Charlotte's crazily tough in terms of mental fortitude. That girl doesn't even show any annoyance despite always—and I mean *always*—being the casualty of your self-indulgent behavior, Slowe. How could she be anything close to normal?"

I sputtered. "I..."

"I wonder what she must have experienced to become that tough. Slowe, where did you pick her up from?"

"Oh, that brings back memories. You used to ask me that question a lot, Alicia. You kept asking me who Charlotte was."

"And you never answered me even once, in the end. Now, I can say that you had a good eye for talent when you chose her. After all, an average retainer would've long lost any fondness towards you."

"Yeah, probably..."

In my defense, it's not like I could answer her question! I can't just

say, “Hey, she’s actually the princess of Huzak.” As for Charlotte’s inner strength that Alicia seems to have questions about, well, she probably got that during her escape from Huzak. Anyone who had such a harrowing experience during their childhood probably wouldn’t be shaken easily.

“You will never find a girl that’s more fitting to be your retainer. So, you better make sure you cherish her so that she doesn’t get stolen away by some other guy, you hear me? Don’t ever forget to thank her for everything she does. Things like this won’t come across unless you put them clearly into words.”

“Yeah... You’re right. You’re exactly right.”

“I think you already know this, but that girl is rather popular. Especially now, since she has recently learned to control her magic properly, which means that she isn’t too different from a noble. I’ve heard that retainers being snatched up by other nobles isn’t uncommon at all. Well, someone who tries to lay their hands on a Denning retainer definitely has a death wish, in my opinion, but...idiots aren’t extinct yet. If you keep losing yourself in your training, she’ll probably be stolen from right under your nose.”

“Thanks for the warning. I’ll make sure I tell Charlotte that I need and appreciate her.”

“You better,” Alicia huffed. “Okay, a slight change of topic here, but I’m planning on heading to Yoram the next day off we have. How does that sound? Sh-Shuya’s coming with us too, but...we could just leave him standing off to the side somewhere.”

Oh, poor Shuya.

After I listened to the details, however, I realized that the day of Alicia’s leisure trip fell on the exact day that Princess Carina would perform the Prayer Ceremony—the day of the showdown between the queen’s faction and the witch of the Dustour Empire. It was rather convenient that Alicia and Shuya wouldn’t be around then. Ever since I obtained my anime knowledge, my goal was always simple: to achieve my own happiness. However, that happiness included Alicia and Shuya. Those two were often dragged into trouble in one way or another, so I was glad for their absence.

“Sorry, I’ve got something planned for that day. Have fun with Shuya.”

There was a long stretch of silence before Alicia finally replied, “Okay.”

Huh? Please don’t make such a face. I feel awful...

The Cirquistan princess always stuck to her own opinion. Unlike Princess Carina, Alicia had overcome her father’s objection to come back to Kirsch. Alicia had thoroughly rebelled against her father, which was why I started wondering why Princess Carina didn’t reject

the queen's decision.

In the anime, Princess Carina's existence had been carefully hidden. With a strong determination, she had avoided coming out of her shell into the world up to this point. *I mean, she even kept hiding the entire time in the anime, despite the great war going on in the background! If she made a serious effort, she would probably be able to flee from the current problem as well. But...she looked as if she was willing to see it through this time. Though her life is on the line, she doesn't resist like she normally does, and I can't for the life of me figure out why.*

"At times like this, if I were Shuya... If Shuya were in my shoes, what would he do?"

He will definitely act. But...there's a big difference between us. He has the Great Spirit of Fire on his side, whose power rivals that of the Great Spirit of Darkness. Shuya is an unbalanced, cheating character who would somehow wrestle a victory from his enemies at the end of the day. He's fundamentally different from me, who has done nothing but run away from the witch.

"I know that we're two different people, and I shouldn't compare, but I can't help but always base my judgment off him..."

In the end, it's a simple choice. I can either choose to involve myself or stay out of it.

The Order is preparing for the inevitable clash. This is an excellent opportunity for the queen to demonstrate the power of the royal court of Daryth and flaunt our national might to the other countries. What's the point of me rudely interrupting them this late into their scheme?

Excuse after excuse echoed in my mind as they drowned out everything else.

And then, the day had finally arrived.

"This is really bad, oink..." I muttered to myself.

Tonight, Princess Carina would lock herself up in the cathedral, but I *still* hadn't made up my mind. I'd ended up skipping class today already, and honestly speaking, I wanted to ignore everything and just go to sleep.

"Valjean..." I muttered glumly. "If the person in the room doesn't answer after three knocks, it means they're not in a good mood. Isn't it common sense to turn right around and go back the way you came?"

"Whoa. Lord Slowe, you haven't been showing up to classes lately, and now you even have bags under your eyes... That is unbecoming of a noble, you know?"

"Are you here to scold me?"

"Miss Charlotte asked me to do her a favor, you see. She seems like she wants to talk to you, Lord Slowe."

"Sorry, but could you please give me some space for now? Pass

that on to Charlotte too, thanks.”

I didn’t want to see anyone. I was more pathetic than ever, and I didn’t want anyone to see me in this sorry state.

After dawn arrived tomorrow morning, news of the witch being safely restrained would be delivered, and all would be right with the world once again. A part of me wanted to believe such a happy ending would happen.

“Lord Slowe, did something happen?”

“Valjean... Do you think I’m strong?”

“Well, that was sudden. Why in the world would you ask that?”

It’s obvious once you give it some thought. I was led around by the nose by the Guardian Knight, unable to retaliate at all. Compared to someone like me, the knights with their scrutinizing preparations would be much more suited for the job, right? I should leave everything to them. I’m not wrong to think that, am I?

But is that really the right thing to do? Choosing to be absent from the critical moment... Would I live to regret that?

“Oh, just tell me already. It’s important to me, okay?”

Valjean sighed with an exasperated look on his face. “Did you lose confidence in yourself or something? Back to the question, though. You are asking me whether you, Lord Slowe, are strong or not, right?” Silently, I waited for his answer.

“That is a silly question. You are the strongest person I know.”

Ugh, why did you have to declare that so confidently? If I hear my friend saying such a thing to my face, there’s no way I can’t give it my all, you know?

“Charlotte...” I said slowly. “What did you just say?”

“I’m going to the cathedral. I...I want to stay by Princess Carina’s side.”

It was too abrupt. *What the heck?*

Okay, so Valjean came to my room. Then, after careful consideration, I decided to answer Charlotte’s summons. I thought that she’d probably interrogate me about why I skipped class, but then it didn’t seem like that was the case. But then she said that she’s heading to the cathedral right after this, and... Things are happening too fast, and I don’t even know how to respond to that.

Finally, somehow, I managed to wrangle my tongue in check and choked out an answer. “It’s the night of the Prayer Ceremony tonight, and nobody can get close to the cathedral.”

The cathedral was under the meticulous supervision of the knights—nobody stood a chance of getting past them. Anyone and everyone at Kirsch would know that.

“That’s not necessarily true. After all, there won’t be any knights

around there tonight.”

“What?!”

Just like Charlotte said, the princess would undergo the ceremony tonight in an utterly vulnerable state, all so that the witch could take the princess hostage. *But that’s something Charlotte should, and could, never know.*

“Master Slowe, I happen to know a lot of things. Sir Kushner informed me extensively.”

“Kush...ner? By that, do you mean Sir Kushner of the Royal Knights?!”

“Yes, him! He told me *aaall* kinds of things!”

My heart raced in my chest. Charlotte’s face brimmed with confidence when she said that. *Why? Why does Charlotte know all this? Is it Kushner? Is that good-looking guy from the Order responsible? Okay, his looks don’t matter in this case, but still, there’s no reason for that guy to have revealed the truth of the ceremony at Kirsch to Charlotte. And I never even imagined that he would secretly contact her!*

“Princess Carina is all alone right now. You know this too, right, Master Slowe?”

I was speechless.

The thing that surprised me most was the fact that Charlotte had kept this from me this whole time. Charlotte had been terrified about someone exposing her identity, and I couldn’t figure out why she would place her trust in a Royal Knight who had approached her.

Charlotte continued. “Being alone isn’t all there is to the story. Princess Carina is suffering. Right now, she feels as if she’s all alone in the world, just like what I used to think. Just like I did before I met you, Master Slowe.”

“Charlotte... Why didn’t you tell me?”

She should have been kept in the dark. She shouldn’t have known that this part of the Guardian Selection was a lure to draw out the witch and that Princess Carina herself was the bait. The true reason for the queen’s visit was meant to be top, top secret.

“And...how much do you know?” I asked, my mind churning.

“Everything. Princess Carina told some of it to me directly, in fact. Master Slowe, did you know that Princess Carina knew everything? And by that, I mean *everything*! She knew it all: my true identity, the Great Spirit of Wind... Everything!”

They had *found out*. My breathing grew erratic from that thought alone. “Th-They...know who you are?”

I had thought that they would make a move and confront me if those people found out, but... *The thought that they might go directly to Charlotte never even crossed my mind.* “Th...That’s impossible... I mean, those guys... They didn’t even show a hint of...”

I was feeling shaken to the core, but Charlotte acted like her usual self. “Apparently, the queen and the Royal Knights all know exactly who I am!”

My voice trembled. “W-Wait a minute. How... How could you act as if nothing happened even after knowing that? They know your identity now... They dug out the truth that we’ve been hysterically concealing all this time!”

“I *did* lose my cool before! But then, Sir Kushner told me about what kind of resolve Princess Carina had held in her heart when she came to Kirsch Mage Institute this time. Master Slowe, it turns out that the queen really did plan on using me as a pawn, did you know that? However, Princess Carina... She’s going to head into the Prayer Ceremony so that my identity can stay a secret. That’s apparently her deal with Her Majesty. And then I asked Sir Kushner why Princess Carina was willing to go so far.”

Princess Carina and the queen had no reason to hide Charlotte’s background. Depending on how they used this information, the princess of that ruined country could bring a tremendous profit into Daryth.

“He told me that it’s because she owes a big debt to you, Master Slowe.”

My thoughts froze for a moment. “Wha...”

It all made sense now. *That’s why the hermit Princess Carina chose to become the living sacrifice to the witch...and the reason she didn’t raise objections to the queen’s plans. If she disagreed, she could have chosen to stop. She has that right. The Guardian Selection is an event that will decide her future, and if she declared that it was too early for her, she should have been able to call it off.*

However, she chose to accept the queen’s plans. I was a little mystified before, questioning why she chose to voluntarily undertake that trial, but now...

“Let me guess, the reason you haven’t been going outside with your mind plagued by worries... It’s the same reason as mine, isn’t it?”

After a long pause, I muttered, “Yeah. It is.”

“Right now, I can’t stop my heart from yelling at me to keep Princess Carina company.”

“I... If possible, I want to do that too. But that place will become a brutal battlefield.”

It will be the site for a battle, and there will be a fierce clash there between the elite Royal Knights and a musketeer. The weak will perish immediately. I can’t bring Charlotte along to such a place.

Ugh, I can’t get myself together.

...But Charlotte has already made up her mind.

“Ch-Charlotte...” I pleaded. *Don’t go. Please don’t go there.*

“Charlotte, could you reconsider this?”

“Master Slowe, I really like you.”

“Hu...h?”

“I don’t mean as a friend. It’s more profound than that.”

“...?”

“I’ve heard what will happen to me if I go to the cathedral tonight from Sir Kushner. And...I thought that I needed to tell you this feeling of mine before I head over to join Princess Carina.”

“...???”

My mind didn’t compute. *What...did she just say? Why did we jump from Princess Carina to this?*

“When I thought that I might never see you again, Master Slowe... All the uncomfortable haze in my chest stemming from the fact that you invited the girl in the rumors to a second date, or the fact that you talked a lot to that girl today... It seemed so trifling in comparison!”

She determinedly pointed a finger at my chest. But I could only stare at her, my eyes wide and my mind blank.

“I may have pretended I was fine, but... You should know that I was really unhappy when you were with her!”

I felt like a hurricane had bulldozed me over, because nothing made sense. *So first, Charlotte’s identity got exposed. Then, Princess Carina declared to the queen that she’d become a sacrifice if that’s what it took to hide that truth.*

“...Master Slowe?”

A-And then?

And then, Charlotte said that *she liked me*.

In a panic, I stammered, “D-Don’t... Don’t mess with me!”

I was at my wits’ end.

“I shut up and heard you out, but you then just started saying whatever you pleased! I-I demand a restart!”

Because...because... Confessing to you was my goal in life. It’s the whole reason I’ve worked so hard up until now. And if you’re the one who takes the initiative to say it first, then...

What do I do?!

“Charlotte!” I exclaimed. “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that!”

“H-Huuuh?! Why?! That took a lot of courage, you know?!”

“All my plans are ruined! Be a little considerate of my feelings, will you?!”

“*Your feelings...? What’s with that?! In that case, you should think about how I feel, constantly thrown into emotional turmoil because of what you do!*”

“Why would you be so affected by what I do?!”

“I mean! The person I like tried to hit on another girl! Don’t you think that would feel unbearable?!”

I took in a sharp breath. “I *told* you that it was a misunderstanding! The one I like is *you*!”

“Even if I know it’s a misunderstanding, I would still feel...miserable... Huh...? Master Slowe, what did you just...?”

“Why can’t you tell that the only one I like is *you*?! Isn’t it obvious that—”

“M-Master Slowe, um...”

“—I can only look at you, and you alone?!”

I was completely incoherent. Even *I* couldn’t understand what was coming out of my mouth.

But it has to be from me. It has to be me.

“I was first! So, I have the right to declare it first!”

This feeling that has always burned hot in my chest... I always thought that I would be the one to share it first.

“Listen, I fell in love with you much, much, *much* earlier than you did with me, you hear me?!”

“M-Master Slowe! Do you even know what you’re saying?!”

Somewhere in the back of my head, I always imagined that my confession would be romantic.

“You only started liking me *recently*, right?! It was different for me! I was a hundred times sooner than you!”

Thinking on it now, no matter what I did, I would never achieve a perfect ten-out-of-ten confession.

This confession is completely impulsive, but...at the same time, this feels more natural than anything else.

“I...I really like you...” By the end, my voice was barely a whisper. My confession was lame as heck. But at the same time, it was just like me, and from the bottom of my heart, I let out a tiny smile.

“I...I li...ke...you...” I stammered, messing up the intonation of every syllable. “I-It’s exactly what it sounds like...”

Then, there was a long period of silence.

Charlotte cupped her cheeks with both hands, her face redder than a dozen roses in full bloom. Her large eyes grew even larger as she stared at me, and she looked like she was on the verge of tears. I was also on the verge of tears.



Oh, my lord and savior...

I think...I might have screwed up big time.



Carina sat on the bench closest to the entrance and basked in the silence.

The cathedral was desolate, and signs of liveliness were nowhere to be found. Usually, the solemn melody of the pipe organ would reverberate through this holy house of prayer as believers offered their prayers to the gods. There was a stained-glass window on the vaulted ceiling, and the light that splashed down from the glass was ethereal, almost as if it could purify fatigue from the human body.

From what Carina had heard, during the siege of monsters, many students had barricaded themselves in this building and had waited wearily in hopes that some salvation would appear.

“And they saw the silhouette of an enormous dragon through the window, didn’t they?” Carina muttered. “Just thinking about it gives me goosebumps.”

It was the night of miracles when a lone student gained the title of Dragon Slayer.

Carina shook her head. “Okay, that’s enough. I mustn’t let my mind wander.”

Even if it had only been their cover story, this was still technically the Prayer Ceremony, the first step towards the Guardian Selection. At the very least, she had to gather her thoughts about her own future.

“The future, huh? My future...” Her voice trailed off.

Though Carina thought that, if someone asked her whether she had the makings of a queen, she would firmly deny it, even now.

The only thing that separated her from common folk was probably her skill in magic. According to Lectrikuhl, however, the spirits took a liking to Carina. That was exactly what people looked for in the queen of Daryth, so apparently, there were no issues at all.

There was still an unspoken “but.” She didn’t know whether such a princess was worthy of the loyalty of the knights, who would protect her with their lives. After all, compared to her mother, Eleanor Daryth, the beloved queen of the Daryth citizens, Carina was like an ant. She was shy and withdrawn, and she didn’t think that she was at all suited for that title.

“But...I’ll do this, and I’ll make it through. It’s not like my death is set in stone or anything.”

Right now, she felt just a tad proud, because she knew that even an inadequate girl like her could protect *them*. Because she had been able to make the queen, her mother, listen to her opinion for the very

first time.

Carina had asked for Charlotte Lily Huzak's identity to be kept secret on the basis of her ties with the Great Spirit of Wind, as well as being a form of repayment to Slowe, the longtime protector of that girl who had made several important contributions to this country. In exchange, Carina would have to confront the witch.

At the sound of the door creaking open, Carina sucked in a deep breath, thinking that the time had finally come. But...

Carina's eyes widened. "Why...?!"

It wasn't the person she had anticipated. The person, no, the *people* who appeared from beyond the door were two individuals who had left a great influence on Carina. The girl, Charlotte, was red in the face and looking at her feet the whole time, which piqued Carina's curiosity.

However, that wasn't the focus right now. Carina wasn't supposed to meet these two here. After all, her plans had been to become friends with them—if possible—after she overcame the trial. To become friends as equals.

Slowe was the first one to speak. "I heard everything from Charlotte, Princess Carina. Don't be such a stranger."

"Every...thing?"

"Everything you told her. I thought that we already had enough secretive people around with the queen. But surprisingly, you're pretty similar to Her Majesty, which was news to me."

"I'm not. I don't want you all to be in danger. I'm not like my mother, who always forces people into near or actual brushes with death."

"Well, we probably won't know that until we get to hear the queen's real opinions, though."

Carina Little Daryth owed Slowe Denning an immeasurable debt. He had saved her from the dragon, and he had saved Kirsch. It had been clear that he'd protected Charlotte for a long time, which was why Carina had distanced him from the current situation, from the witch that he had apparently suffered defeat against once. And yet...

"S-Slowe, I knew that you are ridiculously reckless, but honestly, I never thought that you'd go so far as to break into the Prayer Ceremony. And Miss Charlotte, I thought I told you to keep that fact a secret from Slowe, but..."

"I-I am so sorry..." Charlotte stammered. "But. Um. Please don't turn the conversation on me right now... My head is already full..."

To tell the truth, Carina felt like she was over the moon. She'd thought that she was alone. All of the Royal Knights were waiting for the fateful encounter inside the Colosseum, and she'd felt vulnerable. She'd wanted there to be someone with her. However, the reality was

that she *had* been alone. Perhaps she was just reaping the seeds she had sown as a hermit princess; nobody held out their hand to help her.

"Please don't place the blame on Charlotte," Slowe cut in. "She was the one who gave me the courage to come here in the first place. Originally, she planned on coming to this foreboding place by herself."

"Why...? I was mean to Miss Charlotte, and..."

"Mean? Far from it!" Slowe declared. "Princess Carina, today, I learned that there was someone willing to take our side even after learning about Charlotte's identity. I never thought that was possible."

As he spoke, light spilled into the cathedral, dispelling the darkness inside. The youth, who had become a Dragon Slayer just outside this very building, boldly made his next declaration. "Just knowing such a person existed...brought us peace and hope. The only reason we are able to lead our lives undisturbed right now, Princess Carina, is because you protected us."

Carina stared at him, unable to come up with a reply.

"I used to think that nobody in Daryth would be our ally once they learned of Charlotte's past. I was even prepared to leave this country in case the worst happened, and I knew that keeping this secret under lock and key forever was impossible. That's why I was on cloud nine when I heard otherwise. May I ask why, Princess Carina? Why are you willing to protect Charlotte...to protect *us*?"

Faltering, Carina replied. "Slowe, you stood by me back then. I thought that it was my turn this time, and..."

Moreover, Slowe had lit a light of salvation in Carina's world. Carina's previous stay at Kirsch had definitely cracked something in her hard, unyielding shell. On her way back to the palace, she had come across a dragon, and she'd thought that dying was an acceptable outcome to her miserable life. Yet, at that critical moment, she'd thought that she didn't want to die. She'd realized then that there were still many things she wanted to do.

"W-Well... As you see, I'm currently putting my life on the line to protect Charlotte's secret as well. Maybe I should have confided in you two a little earlier, and...told you about how hard I've been trying..."

Trying to hide the creeping grin on her face, Carina turned her back to the pair. In truth, she was overjoyed, but she was trying to hide it out of embarrassment.

However, that action turned out to be the trigger.

On one of the benches that stretched many dozens of rows, someone was sitting there, detached from everything else. The moment they saw this figure, everyone in the room tensed up.

"M-Master Slowe..." Charlotte stammered. "Over there, there

is...!"

What one would notice first were her clear, sapphire eyes. An uninformed person might have assumed the woman was a goddess with her warm, compassionate gaze, but these three knew her true nature.

"I-It's all right, Charlotte... It doesn't look like she plans on attacking us immediately."

Nobody knew how long the woman, who was one with the darkness, had been there. However, they immediately caught on to the reason they hadn't noticed her presence. The woman hadn't emitted any hostility or a will to harm them. Quite the opposite, in fact—

The witch of the Dustour Empire had only sat quietly on the long bench as she watched over them with warmth in her eyes as she took in the heartwarming scene.



"Francisca..." I hissed. "We're meant to be enemies, so why haven't you done anything?"

I'd only just noticed the villainous aura that suddenly permeated the room, coiling around us like a viper ready to strike. I took a step forward and shielded the two girls behind me.

This was a place of prayer and the grounds for the Guardian Selection; on principle, the three of us should've been the only ones present.

"I happened to observe your interaction from the beginning, and my, my, I've gone and lost any ill will I held because of it," the woman said with a chuckle.



She was a musketeer and the witch of Dustour, whose abilities had gained full acknowledgment from the Great Spirit of Darkness—and someone I'd already lost to once before. Something black and squirming wound its way up her left arm. *So that's what she has in place of the arm that Sir Delfrey sliced off.*

"I would advise against any sudden moves, Slowe Denning. A child like you cannot win against me. Surely you can tell that I have no plans of harming your nation's princess right now, can you not? My only enemy is Eleanor Daryth."

I glared at her. "And you think I'd believe that?"

"I haven't made a move on you three, have I? I had countless opportunities to do so, but alas, you're all such a heartwarming bunch that I simply couldn't bear the thought."

"Why are you even here?"

"Well, since that woman went to great lengths to orchestrate this all, I decided that it would be a waste to pass up the opportunity. Other than that, well... You see, I wished to speak with the little princess over there. So, Slowe Denning, you're only in the way right now, because it seems that the feeling is mutual for the little princess."

My eyes widened. "You're kidding me..."

"I'm sorry, Slowe..." Princess Carina said, grimacing. "She's right. I do want to talk with her a bit."

I frowned. "Princess Carina, that woman is dangerous. *Very* dangerous."

"Yeah, I know. But for some reason... I'm not scared."

No mistake about it, that woman would never be our ally. She was a violent criminal who had murdered several Royal Knights in the fight at the capital and would never rest until she had taken the queen's life. Yet the witch claimed that she wanted to chat with Princess Carina, and the princess even agreed to it. *Princess Carina is extraordinary, in the end... Look at the way Charlotte's clinging to my arm and trembling like a leaf!*

Oh no. Actually *looking* at Charlotte's face, I got flashbacks to our mutual confession earlier, and I had to fight to keep a giddy smile off my face.

The witch spoke next. "Well then, I would like to start this conversation with a declaration. I know everything. For example, this entire cathedral acts as a teleportation circle, and all of your people are waiting in ambush, fully prepared to face me at the other end of the connection. But ultimately, all I'm here for is a mere chat with that pitiful princess."

I was still suspicious. "Francisca... You were supposed to start a

war between the north and the south and consequently unite the continent under the Dustour Empire. If that's not the case anymore... What is your goal now, then?"

"I simply cannot stand the fact that such a ruthless character dares to sit on the throne, of this country or any other. My little princess, how much you know of the boundless abyss of darkness that lurks deep within her I cannot say, but know this: that woman's smile never left her face the entire time, that day inside the palace. 'Oh, won't you please hurry up and try to take my daughter hostage?' She never uttered the words aloud, but her expression spoke all that which went unsaid."

The witch's fury was almost tangible, the figurative needles of electricity sending goosebumps up and down my body. She lowered her voice to a hiss as she spat, "Do you know the one kind of person I could never tolerate? Those who clearly have power and might, but choose to throw their comrades—their *family*—to the wolves."

Francisca had become such a legendary mage because she had always granted salvation and aid to the comrades who swore their loyalty to her. And it was because of such morals she held that the actions of Daryth's queen had crossed several lines too many in her book.

"That filth is an eyesore. I will not accept that woman's existence in my ideal world. No matter who stands in my way, I do not care."

"Wow, mother has earned the ire of a rather troublesome mage," Princess Carina said lightly.

"Little princess." The witch sighed after a moment's pause. "You must have had a hard life with that kind of woman as your mother."

After a pause, Princess Carina admitted, "I...can't deny that. Not a day goes by that I don't question why I had to have someone like her for a mother, that I don't wish she were kinder instead. But I think that mother wonders why. Putting all that aside, I still don't think that you can win against my mother. After all, she has the Moonlit Guardian Knight with her...the strongest man in Daryth."

"Ah, the man who lopped off my left arm in an instant? Indeed, the path towards Eleanor Daryth is a steep and treacherous climb."

She's different from last time, when she brainwashed Professor Yugiri... Why is the witch so calm? It almost feels as if she has been freed from some kind of proverbial shackle, with nothing weighing her down now. I can't seem to figure her out. She gives me this uncanny feeling... It's like looking into an inky abyss.

I interrupted their conversation. "It's a simple matter, then. You could just choose to swallow your animosity towards the queen and return to the north quietly. Can't you do that instead? If you head into the battlefield where the Royal Knights will ambush you, you'll die in

vain with nothing accomplished. What you're doing right now is nothing but a childish act of spite against the queen because she was born with all the gifts of heaven."

I'm begging you, please go back. I didn't think she'd comply with this wish of mine, but I still chose to ask her this once again.

This woman's popularity was nearly unmatched in the north. If my memory served me right, she was supposed to be putting her effort into destroying a certain cult, which grew rapidly in the north, led by a man they called a "priest." She had probably left comrades behind who must've been waiting for her to return as well.

"I can see why our alliance leader took a liking to you. Your knowledge about the overall stakes and progress in a battle impresses me, child, very much so. But it is too late... Someone has noticed me."

Those words were the trigger. A peculiar pattern manifested on the floor of the cathedral, one large enough to cover the entirety of it. Inscriptions of magic floated from the floor into the air, transforming into shining, three-dimensional arcane runes. Not a moment later, an extraordinary amount of mana swirled in a wild vortex, and without thinking, I reached out and clasped Charlotte by the hand from where she stood next to me.

"I suppose I should have expected nothing less of the Great Spirit of Light. Despite being in the capital, it seems that they have caught on to my presence on the teleportation circle."

"Charlotte, Princess Carina!" I yelled. "Hurry, hold on tight to my hand!"

Light burst forth in an explosion, and then...the teleportation began.

The overwhelming amount of mana was enough to make my heart clench in fear—I could only describe it as "out of this world," even though the one responsible was casting the spell all the way from the distant capital.

My thoughts became hazy, my consciousness muddled and distorted with the great force upon me as I was gradually pulled into the whirlpool. I might as well have struggled against a riptide, so disorienting was the experience. Then my body was tossed into the air; I felt a swoop in my stomach as I went weightless for a moment.

However, the warmth in both of my hands grounded me. The two girls reminded me that I still lived.

Only one being in existence could cast such a grand spell. It was the reason the Country of Sorcery was after Lectrikuhl. This was the culmination of Daryth's wisdom, a power so awe-inspiring that research facilities were founded for the sole purpose of studying this marvel.

A calm voice echoed in my head. *"Well, well, I wonder which*

naughty little children are there with the witch!"

It belonged to Lectrikuhl, the Great Spirit that reigned supreme inside the royal capital.

"It looks like a certain someone is rather skilled at attuning with my spell, almost as if they know how. But since this someone is present there, they must be Carina's friend. Who would have thought that child could finally gain a friend? This is wonderful news!"

Then, color once again painted itself into the world, blotting out my whited-out vision. At the same time, I'd no sooner realized the sensation I felt was me flying through the air before my feet once again met the ground.

From either side of me, I could hear the groans of the two princesses beside me who sounded sick, but that was unavoidable. Slowly blowing out a long breath, I opened my eyes. *You're in for a rough ride if you don't know how to prepare yourself for the teleportation spell. Charlotte looks especially... Oh no. She looks almost like a zombie.*

"I shall now announce the beginning of our conquest," a steady voice declared.

We'd arrived in exactly the place I'd anticipated—in the center of that exceedingly spacious arena I'd seen them in that day. Before us was the Order of Royal Knights, armed to the teeth; a quick count told me they numbered thirty-two knights present. That was over half of the entire roster of Royal Knights in active duty under the Daryth royalty.

And then, without even a second of hesitation...

"Slay that witch, my Royal Knights."

...from the topmost row of the Colosseum, Eleanor Daryth, sitting in a box seat that overlooked the entire spectacle, gave the cue to kick off the battle.

Chapter 5: An Ideal Future

The fight had already gone on for quite a while.

I could do nothing...but bite my fingernails nervously as I watched as it unfolded before me.

“Kushner, break through the swarm of arcane beasts and carve an opening for us!”

“We have no information at all about what her spells will do! Focus on evading them as much as you can!”

The spells that the Dream Dealer Witch composed were as varied as they were many, though the majority of them relied upon water magic. Slimy arcane creatures stood in the way of the knights, while ice sculptures assaulted from above. These abundant constructs that the witch manifested forced the knights to fall back several paces, preventing them from engaging her directly in close-quarters combat.

In spite of this, the Royal Knights displayed splendidly coordinated teamwork, steadily mowing the arcane creatures down. They stood toe to toe with the witch as the fighting dragged on, perhaps even with an advantage. I couldn't help but be stunned speechless by their strength.

“You seem rather startled, Slowe,” said a sage-like voice. “Is this perhaps the first time you've witnessed the Order fighting as an organization, and not individuals?”

I nodded. “Yes, Headmaster, that's exactly it. To think that the Royal Knights are able to keep a smile on their faces even though they might die at any moment... They're a lot more experienced than I thought.”

“Her Majesty's enemies are not always under the spotlight. For that very reason, the queen and Maldini loathed the idea of the Order's capabilities becoming known to outsiders.”

“Ah, so that's why...” I trailed off.

“Indeed. Thus, the masses are kept in the dark about the many grave plights that our Royal Knights have overcome.”

Right. Compared to those of House Denning, who uphold the motto of constantly being on the battlefield, they are lacking in experience. Or at least, that's the general consensus, but how many people would still think that after seeing the caliber of their skills in battle like this, I wonder? They were founded solely to protect the royalty of Daryth, and...is this how powerful they can be when the shield transforms into a sword instead?

“But Headmaster, why in the world do the Royal Knights have such high morale...?”

“In truth, this is also the first time I have seen the Order quite this strong. However, I have an idea as to why this is so—one man risked his life to protect our queen back in the palace, and he still shows no signs of awakening from his coma: the Knight Commander, Johannes Maldini. His last words to them before he collapsed seem to have been rather effective.”

A yell cut into our conversation. Professor Loco Moco clenched his eyes shut as he maintained the thin membrane of the barrier with his bare hands. “This ain’t a picnic, ya old coot!” he complained. “Don’t just stand there talkin’ with Denning while shovin’ all the work onto me! Maintainin’ barriers ain’t my thing, ya know!”

“Consider this a part of your training, Loco Moco. You have a habit of disregarding defensive measures, after all. This is a rare opportunity in and of itself... One does not get the chance to unleash a barrier fueled by the great Lectrikuhl every day.”

“This barrier happens to be our princess’s lifeline, ya know?! There’s no way I could be that carefree!”

Right, we mustn’t forget that. The reason we’re able to sit back and relax while spectating the battle is because of this intricate barrier woven of layers and layers of spells. From time to time, powerful wayward spells flew in our direction, but this barrier shielded us from all attacks.

“I must say, Headmaster, the queen is a little too mischievous,” I grumbled with no real heat behind it. “Who would’ve thought that she actually made extensive preparations to protect Princess Carina in the first place?”

The headmaster chuckled. “I agree on that front. She is a tricky one. But she also did it out of necessity to test Princess Carina’s resolve.”

“And that’s how things are, Denning!” Professor Loco Moco barked. “But well, I gotta say that nobody expected the two of ya to cling to the princess and hitchhike! Also, hey, how did ya recover from mana sickness so fast?!”

In an instant, we’d teleported from the cathedral to this arena. That unbelievable miracle was only made possible thanks to Lectrikuhl’s power. A path of light connected these two areas, and we’d leaped through it in a mere blink of an eye. The moment I had opened my eyes, Headmaster Morozov and Professor Loco Moco appeared before me.

“Slowe, what a coincidence,” the headmaster said.

“H-Headmaster?! Professor Loco Moco too...!”

“Save the chat for later when we have plenty of time, ya old coot!” the

professor howled. "I don't wanna end up collateral damage of their fight!"

I tried asking why they were here at the arena, but... My first priority was focusing on not losing the contents of my stomach. I'd braced myself for this, but the effects of the teleportation sucked. I couldn't control the uncontrollable shivering that racked me from head to toe.

And that was to say nothing of the two princesses who had teleported along with me. Princess Carina closed her eyes, seemingly trying to endure and weather out the storm, but Charlotte wore an expression I had never seen on her before, and...well...

"Sorry, Denning, but I'm gonna put yer retainer to sleep! Persistin' isn't always the right choice!"

"Hm." The headmaster raised an eyebrow. "A wise choice, Loco Moco. Now... I would advise against staying here."

A fierce battle had already begun where we'd landed. We hurried to distance ourselves from the area.

The witch didn't even spare a lick of attention in our direction during our whole evacuation. Just like she had announced in the cathedral, that woman's only goal was tearing apart the queen's plans.

"Do not be intimidated by their number! We only have to defeat one person!"

After the signal of the queen, who sat on the topmost row of the Colosseum's spectator seating, the Order of Royal Knights launched their attacks towards the witch.

Replying in kind, the witch shot up mana pellets into the air. The woman didn't seem affected by the teleportation process at all. Before the dumbfounded knights, the mana pellets repeatedly divided and expanded, quickly multiplying into the hundreds and thousands. Had her opponents been mere students of Kirsch, she would have turned them into mince in less than a second; that was how powerful this spell was. And then, like a tidal wave crashing onto the shore, the mana pellets slammed down onto the knights on the ground.

"Keep calm. This is nothing as long as you keep a cool head!"

"She's attacking us from below too!"

This time, blades thrust up from the ground in a rage with their numbers in the thousands, seeking to impale the knights like human skewers.

However, these knights were not any ordinary warriors. Every single one of them carried this country on their shoulders and was a veteran in the world of bloodshed. Nobody feared the witch, no matter how many hundreds of magical weapons she summoned.

One man in particular stood out among the rest as he stood at the side and observed silently, however. The man crowned as the queen's infallible sword, the Guardian Knight, only glared at the ongoing battle from her

side.

And that led us to the present, a healthy distance away from ground zero and viewing the battle from inside a barrier on the sidelines.

“Headmaster, Sir Delfrey isn’t participating in the fight... Is that because of what I think it is?” I asked.

The headmaster nodded. “Her Majesty wishes to defeat that witch while conserving the Guardian Knight’s power.”

I frowned. “Our enemy is one of the Three Musketeers; this battle will decide the future of this country... What in the world is Her Majesty thinking, I wonder?”

“It’s only natural that the queen wants it this way,” Loco Moco explained. “If we’re able to bring down one of the musketeers without our Guardian Knight, we can flaunt our military might to other nations.” He looked over his shoulder back at the headmaster. “More importantly, ya old coot, how is Princess Carina?”

“She must have complete quiet and rest for a while,” the headmaster said gravely. “I would be shocked if she could remain lively after being subject to that much mana.”

Experiencing teleportation meant experiencing a point-blank blast of immense mana. The spell had left me with a vile mana sickness, much worse than what I’d braced myself for. The two princesses were practically falling apart. Charlotte seemed to be having a nightmare as she cried out in her sleep, and Princess Carina placed a hand against her forehead, battling her headache while still managing to fix her eyes on the clash of factions.

“Morozov, no matter how sick I feel...don’t even think about...putting me to sleep...” the princess said through clenched teeth.

“As you wish, Your Highness,” the headmaster replied.

I was taken aback by Princess Carina’s belligerence. She was almost like a different person from the hermit in her bedroom.

The headmaster turned to me. “But Slowe, I admit that we are also rather confused. The story I heard was that the witch would appear here with Princess Carina as her hostage, but that did not seem to be the case at all. What in the world happened in the cathedral?”

“I had the opportunity to talk to that woman in the cathedral, Headmaster. The witch never planned on taking the princess hostage in the first place. Furthermore, it seems that the queen already knew of the witch’s purpose here because of the Great Spirit of Darkness acting as her liaison. From the very beginning, that woman only ever wished to defeat the queen and nothing else.”

“If that is true, Slowe, it seems that we were also deceived by Her

Majesty. To think that she didn't disclose such key information to anyone else..." The headmaster shook his head. "She never changes... She truly trusts no one."

"Indeed... I wish it were all a joke instead, but I can't bring myself to laugh."

In the cathedral, the witch hadn't made a move to kidnap the princess. Instead, she'd deliberately dived right into the ambush of the Order so that she could face the queen head-on and defeat her. In contrast, the queen conserved the Guardian Knight, choosing to make this battle into a demonstration towards other countries.

"Denning, ya don't look like yer convinced."

"There's no way I can agree with this. Her Majesty is gambling with too much at stake. Yes, we might gain honor and prestige if we win, but if we lose, we'll lose everything," I argued.

"Well, I was a Royal Knight, so it seems pretty normal to me," Professor Loco Moco said with a shrug. "Her Majesty has always been like that. She...has never placed her faith in anyone."

Hearing the professor say that so nonchalantly set off a churning cocktail of emotions so potent I couldn't tell one thing from the next. I couldn't describe what I was feeling even if I tried.



To the senior Royal Knight, Dalton, he could honestly say he was facing his archnemesis.

"The barrier is still present! The princess is still unharmed! Focus only on your opponent!"

"Don't let your attention waver! That barrier is a power bestowed upon Morozov by the Great Spirit of Light! No matter how many spells impact it, it will not break!"

She went by the name "Francisca," one of the musketeers of Dustour who were all said to be one-man armies. She constantly shrouded herself with a spell that blurred her visage, making it near impossible to see her with the naked eye. Among the musketeers, they had the least amount of intel on this witch.

Right now, Dalton and his fellow knights were being overwhelmed by that *one single person*.

"Distance yourselves from her, scatter, and distract her! We have numbers on our side, so don't turn it into a one-on-one duel!" Dalton's breath hitched, and he shouted through clenched teeth, "Oliver, fall back! That wound...! Probably...! Needs time to heal...!"

"See to your own wounds before you concern yourself with mine, Dalton! You are in a much more critical condition than I am! We are already shoulder to shoulder with death, so let us proceed together!"

Unlike what the common folk assumed, the duties of the Royal

Knights were not all valiant and glamorous. From time to time, duty required they bury deep, dark secrets, never to see the light of day. Though he was one such knight, even to Dalton, he'd never seen an opponent dripping with such an astonishing amount of malignant darkness before. Of that, he was sure. She was unprecedented... After all, this woman was after the queen's life.

"One-Strike Dalton! The rogue is within range! We will now proceed to construct the *Holy Sanctum* spell; what about you?!"

"All clear on my side!" Dalton shouted.

Dalton wasn't interested in the process of things. He didn't care a whit about how the witch had infiltrated the palace. The role of a Royal Knight was to protect Daryth royalty, and the queen had chosen to oppose that witch. They would carry out her orders, and that was all there was to it.

"Eleanor Daryth... I see that you are not commanding your treasured Guardian Knight to face me. My, my, you must think very little of me."

With a face devoid of any emotion, the witch fixed her gaze on the knights before her. Dalton didn't think that the rogue had played her hand yet.

The last time they had clashed with her, the Guardian Knight had sliced off her left arm in a flash, and the Knight Commander had risked his life to shred half of her body into pieces. Compared to then, the knights lacked two important players, but this time they'd also come prepared.

The woman narrowed her eyes. "I do not, in any way, see how you could have the leeway to take me so lightly, but... I suppose I shall put an end to these games."

In her field of view, the swarm of knights scattered in every direction. The collection of the cream of the crop of Daryth, its pride and joy, wasn't even the tiniest of threats. This was all just a warm-up match to her.

Tilting her head up, the corner of the witch's lips curled up slightly. There, behind the Guardian Knight's protection, she could see Eleanor Daryth and the Great Spirit of Darkness.



I clenched my hands into fists so tight that my nails dug into my flesh as I stared at their battle.

"Slowe, I suggest that you relax. Our job here is pretty much done," the headmaster said.

The Royal Knights were usually cool and composed, but now on the battlefield, some were nursing the injured while others

persistently taunted the witch. These were how they truly were, something I never would've guessed from my previous interactions with them.

Spells that missed their targets ricocheted off the barrier as the battle wore on, dissipating on impact. Had an average mage erected the barrier, it would've probably collapsed after a single hit, but this thing proudly maintained its extraordinary tenacity.

"Headmaster, this barrier is..." I trailed off.

"We used a magical artifact infused with Lectrikuhl's magic to construct this barrier. Though it pains me to admit it, our abilities are not sufficient to make something of this caliber."

"Ah... So it is just like I guessed..." I muttered.

"While we maintain it, we cannot cast any other spells. I am very glad you are here, Slowe. Without you, nobody would have been able to soothe Princess Carina with a healing spell."

Unlike the soundly sleeping Charlotte, Princess Carina stayed conscious in the real world, staring intently at the fighters beyond the barrier. *Well, rather than fighters, it's probably more accurate to say that she's staring at the witch, who is single-handedly trading blow after blow with the Royal Knights.* Our voices didn't seem to catch her attention.

"Headmaster, Professor Loco Moco, could you answer a question of mine?"

"What's up, Denning? Are ya still peeved 'bout us leaving ya behind?"

"That doesn't bother me anymore. I only wish to sate my curiosity. Does Her Majesty truly understand how significant the outcome of this fight is for Daryth's future?"

I knew about an alternate future that we might have trod: *Shuya Marionette*. To steer the world off the path of war, I had always faced all my opponents with my full abilities without exception, and I had brought them down that way. Yet the queen wasn't letting the Guardian Knight participate, even though this wasn't a fight where you could go easy on your opponent out of pride.

"Neither the Great Spirit of Darkness nor the Guardian Knight are fighting. If we have those two, our Country of Knights would emerge victorious, putting an end to that witch's plans. In my eyes, that is the best choice and one we ought to make."

"Her Majesty wishes to demonstrate our country's military might to the world," the headmaster said patiently.

Even though Royal Knights were fighting with their entire being right in front of me, I was here *doing nothing*.

Up until now, I had always been a key player on the board. Perhaps because of that, it got harder and harder to remain a bystander; my patience grew dangerously thin.

“Denning,” Professor Loco Moco addressed me. “The headmaster and I have ta protect Her Highness, and the Royal Knights over there have ta kill the witch. Ya have a point—we have the power ta do somethin’ ’bout it. At the very least, we’re powerful enough ta make a difference if we join the crowd over there, but guardin’ the princess is also important.”

I frowned. “I have never heard of anyone being stingy with their forces against a musketeer.”

“Which is exactly why this would be a golden opportunity ta demonstrate Daryth’s worth. Her Majesty’s plans might be overly optimistic, yer right, but the profits in return are nothin’ to laugh at if we succeed.”

If we succeed. If.

Zenelaus had also faced a musketeer, and there, the city had only wrestled victory away from the man thanks to the joint forces of numerous adventurers. They hadn’t done *anything* like pruning their own feathers.

And they claim that the queen isn’t letting the Guardian Knight participate because she wants to flaunt our power, don’t they?

...No. That’s wrong.

This fight is for Princess Carina. It’s for Princess Carina, who will take over the throne of Daryth in the future.

The queen wishes to develop the Country of Knights into the unquestionable strongest country in the south until then. Everything, everything in this battle was planned with the intent of preventing her beloved daughter from suffering caused by relationships with neighboring countries in the south in the future.

“It is futile, Slowe. This barrier constructed by Lectrikuhl does not let anything pass,” the headmaster said slowly.

For some reason, the truth really irks me.



“Dalton, Ed is down! There’s going to be a gap in our ring around the rogue!”

“I’ll fill in for Ed! Are the preparations for the *Holy Sanctum* spell still not finished yet?!”

The pressure from the witch increased, and alarm bells ringing with ominous premonitions echoed in Dalton’s mind.

His opponent was one of the Three Musketeers. The Eye of the Crimson Lotus in Zenelaus had only managed to vanquish a musketeer of similar power by amassing everything the city had against them.

The Royal Knights were the best of the best, and because of that, they were aware that their abilities didn’t hold a candle to the witch.

“We really cannot subdue her by ourselves! I suggest that we ask

for Sir Delfrey's aid!"

"Kushner! Don't forget that this is an ideal opportunity to demonstrate our might to the whole land!"

Despite knowing that they fought in futility, fear didn't have a place in anyone's heart.

In the palace, they had comrades struck by the enemy's blade in their effort to protect the queen. They had comrades doused with her curses from head to toe. And here, in the present, the ground littered with holes and imperfections represented their pride. They would not run, not even from such a formidable foe.

"We are the rulers of fire and wind," they chanted.

There was an embodiment of light itself, not unlike a miniature sun, and it was a product of the witch's magic. Even with such a force looming over them, the Royal Knights did not falter, choosing to each construct a barricade. Light began spilling out in a tangible mass, and a tempest of destruction devastated everything it could find.

The gap between the witch and the individual knights was clear as day.

"We are the uniters of spears and shields."

But what about it? they thought. They had known that from the very beginning.

Moreover, they didn't fight because they were sure of their victory. They dived into the battle because *they had no other choice*. Defeat was not an option.

"We are the warriors who devote every last drop of our blood to the Country of Knights."

The knights braced themselves on their knees against the impact of the explosion, and then... The preparations were done.

Together, they chanted the final incantation. *"Fire!"*

A beam of light that threatened to crush the eyes of anyone who looked at it shot towards the witch. This sacred flame, which was said to turn the demons of hell to dust and ash, purified everything in its wake. The witch was blasted by a blaze that would scorch one's skin even from afar before it engulfed her utterly.

The witch's specialty was her ability to escape into the shadows. Though the knights didn't know the theory or methods behind it, this all-encompassing tidal wave of an inferno was the spell of choice that would seal off all her escape routes.

With the bright, burning blaze reflected in his eyes, the knight closest in distance to the witch, senior Royal Knight Dalton...*fell to the ground*. Even he himself couldn't comprehend what had happened. Then another Royal Knight followed. Then another. For no rhyme or reason, the knights dropped one by one to the ground like flies.

Then, the inferno that blanketed the entire area gradually faded

away. A shadow emerged from the smoke.

“Such fragile creatures you are. And you call yourselves the Order of Royal Knights. How pitiful. None of you could figure out what was happening at all, could you?”

They had made flawless preparations. They hadn’t underestimated her by any means.

So why, then, had she defeated them? The answer was, they were too uninformed about the witch’s true nature.

“You might have noticed if you didn’t have tunnel vision and hadn’t focused only on the spells I cast. Just a little bit of attentiveness would have done the trick.”

Their enemy was a sublime champion of the Dustour Empire. She knew countless methods of decimating a united order of knights in a single breath. And now, the tables had turned in her favor.

“This is where the real show begins. Look carefully, Eleanor Daryth. My preparations are complete.”

The air itself was now a corrosive substance.

The first ones to notice the change weren’t the victims, the Royal Knights. They hadn’t noticed, and couldn’t have noticed. The Guardian Knight, who had stood at the ready in the audience stands, narrowed his eyes as he sensed that something was off. The air that he inhaled through his nostrils wasn’t quite right. Something was corrupted about the air that blew upwards.

“Eleanor, I’ll stay here as an observer. But I have one piece of advice if you’re willing to listen. If you keep being stingy, you’re going to regret it,” Nanatrij warned.

Royal Knights collapsed into a heap on the ground one after the other, groaning. And their numbers were only decreasing.

Who could have ever imagined such a disastrous scene would come to be? It was clear that the present state of affairs was grave. Thus, after hearing that warning, Eleanor Daryth immediately made a decision.

“Rudolf,” she called out.

The named Guardian Knight sprinted down the steps in a heartbeat and leaped into the arena. The moment he alighted on the battleground, a wave of dizziness overcame him. *Just one breath and it’s already affecting me this much*, he thought in slight alarm.

He immediately swung the Guardian Sword and purged the surrounding air with wind. Watching him from above, Eleanor grimaced.

“Poison, I see... Dirty little tricks,” the queen spat.

“Ah, right in one,” said Nanatrij. “It seems that the potion she sprinkled around was evaporated by the fire, and now it’s one with

the air. Well, you could call it one of her old tricks, but it's been a while since she last used it."

After a moment of silence, Eleanor said, "The Guardian Sword can eradicate spells with its strikes."

"Eleanor, those reactions aren't caused by a spell. It's a simple effect. I hate to break the news to you, but the Guardian Sword is powerless against anything that's non-magical. You need to purify the entire area soaked with the poison if you want to do something about it. But, well, that spell has to be vast in range and powerful at that. I don't think Fran would give you the spare time to do such a thing."

The witch couldn't have heard the Great Spirit's words. However, the woman who had lured the Guardian Knight onto the battlefield laughed loudly with derision. She aimed a sadistic smile towards Eleanor that almost seemed to mock her. "*Look at the knights you have carefully reared,*" it seemed to say. "*They are nothing.*"

After a lengthy pause, Eleanor muttered, "A woman with poor taste. Why in the world did she do this?"

"Oh, her goal? That's pretty obvious. She wants to show off to you. You two really are like oil and water."

The Great Spirit of Darkness knew more than enough about the witch's capabilities. The musketeer was a gifted mage she had personally groomed, after all.

However, things could have ended differently. If the strongest man of this country had fought the witch with all of his might from the very beginning, fate would have likely taken an alternative path.

"Sir Delfrey! Do not care about us! Please unleash your ability as the Guardian Knight!!!" a Royal Knight lying on the ground screamed, but it only left a hollow, helpless echo.

So that the Royal Knights on the ground wouldn't be collateral damage, the Guardian Knight restrained his abilities as he confronted the witch.

Eleanor frowned. "Rudolf... Why are you hesitating?"

"Look at that poor guy. The Royal Knights are chaining him down, and the Guardian Knight can't fight with all his strength. Shouldn't have expected anything but the worst from Fran. As always, her ability to detect her enemy's weaknesses is first class."

The Great Spirit of Darkness was not a stranger at all to Francisca's personality. The north of the continent was a cold, ruthless world where survival of the fittest ruled supreme, but Francisca just happened to be the odd one out who treasured her comrades above all else once they joined forces. The woman made an exception for her comrades, who were connected to her in heart, and treated them like her own family.

Thus, to the witch, abandoning one's own child was something

utterly unforgivable, and when the culprit was the ruler of a country, well...

“But I must say, I’m surprised. The unmatched witch is choosing to judge the nature of a foreign king... Who would have thought? Perhaps that child has changed her mind slightly after coming to the warm south.”

“She treated my knights like worms... Absolutely vile!”

Nanatrij sighed. “See, Eleanor? This is why I said that you’re underestimating her too much.”

The sword she took pride in was smashed into two, and the queen of the Country of Knights lost her composure. Who could have ever predicted her in such a state of disarray? The display only went to show how grave the situation was.

At this point, the queen had even forgotten about a certain watchful observer inside the barrier located in the corner of the arena: her beloved daughter.

“That child chose this strategy because she wanted to force you to see that the knights you so carefully raised are nothing but insignificant bugs.”

“Great Spirit of Darkness! Don’t just stand there laughing; tell me! Does that woman have no weaknesses?!”

“That would be going against our arrangement, Eleanor. I’m just an observer. But I’ll tell you one thing. Your defeat is now set in stone.”



“What is *that*, ya old coot?! Things look pretty bad...actually, very, very bad!”

I could only silently agree with the professor’s loud assessment. The Royal Knights were groaning and falling one by one. It seemed that even they couldn’t figure out what had happened. Inside the barrier, our breaths quickened, even though we weren’t doing anything.

That *Holy Sanctum* spell cast by the Royal Knights manifested in a roaring blaze, but our barrier had been even able to block the heat of the flames. And now, *something* was happening beyond this isolating barricade.

“Loco Moco! Do not disturb the barrier...” the headmaster ordered. “It seems that as long as we are inside it, we will not suffer its effects.”

“Look at the Guardian Knight!” Frustration was clear in the professor’s voice. “The Royal Knights are weighin’ him down, and he can’t fight as he pleases!”

The scene that awaited us outside the barrier was something none

of us had ever anticipated. The Royal Knights were all out of the competition, which had led to the Guardian Knight engaging the witch in a counterattack. However, his allies were hindering him.

Princess Carina tilted her head with a face wiped of all emotion. "Is it...poison?"

"My guess is the same as yours, Princess Carina... The witch probably scattered poison in the midst of the battle." I frowned.

"What an underhanded move..." she muttered slowly.

Princess Carina was likely correct. Compared to earlier, color had returned somewhat to her complexion, and it seemed that she had also recovered enough to analyze the battle rationally. Just like her, I also had a guess about why the knights were suffering right now.

Hello there, Mister Anime Knowledge who has become worthless lately, it's finally your time to be useful. I knew why the knights had been reduced to that state, and...I also knew how to rescue them.

"Poison splashed onto the ground evaporated and is dissolving in the air. Or at least, that is the most reasonable explanation in my eyes," I observed.

The headmaster furrowed his eyebrows. "I see. So that is why the witch heavily favored water magic in this battle. Loco Moco, don't stare at us dumbly. To put it simply, a deadly poison is saturating the air outside."

"Wh-Who are you callin' dumb?! But the Guardian Knight is blastin' the air away with wind, yet it doesn't look like the knights are doin' any better!"

"The Guardian Sword has the ability to destroy magic, but it is powerless against naturally occurring phenomena, Professor," I explained.

Professor Loco Moco drew in a sharp breath. "Looks like yer rather calm, Denning! If yer right, then this is worse than a disaster! We need ta save them!"

I nodded. "And I have a proposal. I have the ability to purify the poison soaking the ground, and I can save them."

The headmaster was firm about his reply. "Slowe, you must not."

And I was just as firm about my argument. "At this rate, the Guardian Knight will lose. Headmaster, there is no reason at all for you to hesitate. Please let me leave the barrier."

Then, the unexpected happened. The witch's spell, which had been hurtling towards the Guardian Knight, suddenly changed its course.

Its new goal was...*the queen*. The attack took everyone by surprise, and it charged towards the queen at a speed that the Guardian Knight couldn't fully react to. However, moments before it could land a hit, it was absorbed by a barrier that was manifested instantaneously.

The narrow escape from death was only made possible by the Demon King's Necklace, Nightseeker. That was the name of the necklace that the queen wore around her neck, and it was a tool for self-defense that Lectrikuhl had given to her.

The professor shivered. "My blood nearly froze just now..."

"Headmaster... We mustn't let this go on!" I exclaimed.

The Guardian Knight hadn't been fully defeated, but the witch had attacked the queen. I'd never considered that possibility. *But...it also means that the Guardian Knight has already been driven into a corner.*

The three of us froze in shock at the hair-raising event, and then...

There was a laugh. "Hah hah... That's so funny...!" It was a sound that was the antithesis to our frozen state. It came from *Princess Carina*, who had finally managed to get to her feet without support.

"Princess Carina... What is so funny?" I asked in a stupor.

"It is hilarious... I mean..."

Her head was probably still throbbing, because Princess Carina held a hand to her head as she began chuckling.

The princess had noticed the strangeness of the knights sooner than everyone else, and she had been deep in thought with a somber look just moments earlier. I had absolutely no clue what she found so laughable. There just wasn't anything comical about the current situation at all.

She gestured. "I mean, look at mother's irritated face! It's the first time I've seen her like that, you know?"

Then, with a clear, resounding voice, the next queen of Daryth said *this*. "She has been so desperate to make herself look strong, but look at how she ended up! Such a sorry state!"

The princess was heartbreaking to watch, and Professor Loco Moco turned his face away from her. As a former Royal Knight, the professor had accompanied the queen and Princess Carina for a long time. He probably knew about their fractured relationship.

"Even though she's a weakling, she tries to be strong. And now, she's practically up against the wall! Don't you find that hilarious?"

The defeat of the Guardian Knight was equal to the queen's loss. Yet, Princess Carina didn't seem to care at all.

"Everyone sang mother's praises to the heavens, but what you see now is reality. Slowe... I think I told you before about how that book, the one that *everyone* at school wants her to autograph, is full of lies, right?"

"Yes. You did not tell me about the reason behind that statement then, however."

"Mother and her knight threw away their protection and learned about the big, wide world, and they got scared! After stepping outside our borders, they were only prey for usurpers, completely helpless the

whole time. That's why—"

"Princess Carina..." I said slowly with a pained voice. "I'm afraid that this isn't the time to talk about such things..."

However, Princess Carina never once shifted her gaze. Even now, her eyes reflected the pair who had crossed the continent. "To protect themselves, and to prevent anyone from ever snatching anything away from them again, the two of them aimed to make Daryth into the mightiest country in the south. They kept thinking that the Country of Knights had to become strong and stay strong. That's what I meant when I said that book is filled with lies. That's why...it gets on my nerves. She always demands that I be tough, but what a joke, because she always makes sure I never get into any danger..."

This fight was the closing chapter of the future that our queen had wished for. If we were able to pull through this crisis, Daryth would likely become the supreme ruler of the south, both in name and reality.

"Even though she's a bigger coward than anyone, she...she dares to dream too big, like trying to scoop an entire ocean with her tiny hands, and...she tries so hard to make this country into the number one country in the south... Yet, at the last moment, this is how she ends up! How could I do anything other than laugh...?"

However, out of her concern for Princess Carina and when her daughter would take over the throne, the queen had decided to solidify Daryth's status in the south by conserving the Guardian Knight. And that was what had led to this sorry sight.

Up in the audience seats, the queen had risen to her feet at some point, and she was arguing about something with the Great Spirit of Darkness. She had no composure, no poise, nothing. It was hard to connect her with the person who had crossed the continent.

Princess Carina's tone was impassive. "Morozov, will you please dissolve the barrier?"

The headmaster shook his head. "I cannot. Her Majesty entrusted us with the mission of guaranteeing your absolute safety, Your Highness."

Professor Loco Moco's voice followed quickly after. "Exactly what he says, Your Highness. No matter what happens, we'll keep upholdin' this barrier. Even if you command it, Your Highness, 'm afraid we can't obey."

Even now, there were numerous knights suffering outside this barrier. The witch's attacks extended even to the queen, and the Guardian Knight was struggling with his unfavorable position.

Princess Carina fixed her eyes squarely on the collapsed knights on the battlefield below. Then, she turned around, and this time, she looked at me. "Slowe, I know that I don't have the right to ask this of

you, but...”

Her gaze didn't waver. Her eyes looked right into mine.

In that case, I'll respond to her wish head-on as well. “What is it, Princess Carina?”

“There's...something wrong with me,” she said slowly.

There were a mother and daughter who couldn't meet each other halfway. There was someone tied down by her stubbornness, closing off all her ways out. And then, there were people who chose to be observers despite knowing about the discord between the two, unable to act.

“Even though I hate mother...”

In the end, the queen would probably never change. Even if her bond with her daughter broke completely, if it meant that she could stay on the top of the food chain, it was an insignificant sacrifice. That was the woman known as Eleanor Daryth, the queen of Daryth. And...as her daughter, Princess Carina knew her mother's habits of putting on a brave front better than anyone else.

“I hate her, and yet... Right now, I don't want to see her like that.”

Thus, the only one who could extend a helping hand to her was this girl, Carina.

“I know it better than anyone else. I...I know how much blood, sweat, and tears mother shed for this country... If she loses this fight, mother won't ever be able to get back on her feet... But that isn't the only reason I can't stand this...”

The knights weren't the only ones who were sure of that—I was too. Back when I had gone through the *Sanctuary* and was permitted to enter the princess's room, Princess Carina had boldly declared that her mother, a celebrity at Kirsch, was full of lies. But...behind every word of hers, I had heard the echoes of her pride and joy.

“You see, I... I don't want... I *never* want mother to lose...”

And...she could never fake the frustration on her face right now, so...

“So please... If you can, Slowe...”

I looked up at the night sky, taking in a deep breath.

...so, I will embrace her wish with everything I have.

“Save our knights. Show me a miracle once again, just like on that day...!”

With a deep nod, I answered her call. “Yes, Your Highness.”

I pointed my wand at the barrier. *My role is to destroy the masterpiece specially made by Lectrikuhl, which is protecting us from all attacks even now, and then save the knights.* “Headmaster. I shall demolish the barrier temporarily, but as long as you manifest it again

quickly, there will not be any issues.”

I've made up my mind, so all that's left is to swiftly execute my plan.

Professor Loco Moco nearly groaned in frustration. “Did ya even hear a word of what we just said, Denning?! Even the Order lost against the enemy out there! Even if ya can resurrect the dead, it's not enough! And breakin' this barrier isn't possible for ya either!”

Okay, this man doesn't get it. He doesn't get it at all. Since you're a former Royal Knight, surely you can tell! Princess Carina is worried about the queen right now. Can't you smell the reconciliation in the air?

“As yer professor, I can't let ya head into that kinda danger!” he barked.

The headmaster interrupted the professor. “No, Loco Moco. We must not stop him.”

“Wha—?! What the heck are ya sayin', ya old coot?!”

“The question lies in whether Slowe is capable or not...”

The headmaster picked up on it. Princess Carina's concern for the queen held much significance considering the cold, extinguished relationship between the two, and...

“Slowe, I am sure that you have witnessed the astounding abilities of the Great Spirit of Light, who was able to teleport you here from the cathedral in an instant. If you wish to leave this barrier, brute force will not do the trick... Do you think you are capable?”

You're asking me whether I can break the barrier, huh?

Listen here, it doesn't matter whether I can or not. I will.

I thrust my arm into the membrane of the barrier. Professor Loco Moco let out a yelp of surprise, but nope, I was hearing none of that. Nuh-uh. *Oh, wow. Sure enough, the Great Spirit of Light's personal creation is something to behold. It has a beautiful structure.*

“Headmaster, if you're asking whether I can break this barrier or not, the only possible answers you'd get out of me are yes and yes.”

“Well, now. May I ask you to shed some light on the reason for your overflowing confidence?”

You see the girl sleeping there? I managed to tell her...that I like her.

And yet... I gritted my teeth. I don't even get to enjoy the feeling thanks to these guys.

Besides, compared to all the hardships I suffered before I finally made my confession...

“A tiny problem like this won't faze me at all!!!”



If someone asked Delfrey whether he thought he should save the fallen Royal Knights...

“To think that the Guardian Knight himself would defy his orders... What a surprise. May I ask what caused this change of

heart?"

...he would have said, "No."

For they were each independent warriors, individuals who held a respectable amount of power. He knew very well that, in the event of their failure, the knights themselves would not ask for succor and salvation.

And yet, in defiance of his duty to defeat the witch, Delfrey instead wielded the Guardian Sword to save his fellow knights.

"Shut up!" he hissed.

"It should be crystal clear to you. At this rate, you will die. Surely you are aware of that?"

"I am ordering you to *shut up!*"

The Guardian Knight could admit at last that their plan had failed. There was no other conclusion—the Order of Royal Knights had lost. Not only had *they* lost, but no matter which way he looked at it, Delfrey *himself* would not emerge victorious while also protecting the fallen knights.

But sacrificing the knights in exchange for victory was out of the question. If he did that, it would fill his mistress Eleanor's heart with sorrow. He knew better than anyone how much she suffered whenever she thought about all they'd lost in the palace.

"You cannot hope to defeat me if you also mean to protect the Royal Knights."

The Guardian Knight gritted his teeth. If he unleashed the force of the moonlight bestowed upon the Mystical Sword, he had a chance of victory.

But he couldn't do it. If he released the Guardian Sword's power in a place like this, he would surely kill his comrades. The witch would undoubtedly summon a barrier to deflect any attack he made against her, and the resulting wave of power would likely lead the vulnerable Royal Knights to their deaths.

There was a distressed yell. "Rudolf! Why are you hesitating?!"

The witch sighed. "That woman's voice always gets on my nerves. What worth is victory if it comes at the cost of your comrades' lives? In that respect, I am glad that *you*, Moonlit Guardian Knight, seem to have a decent heart, unlike *her*."

"You don't know anything about how Eleanor feels," Delfrey hissed.

Throughout their journey across the continent, these two had learned the gruesome truth about what went on outside their sheltered world. In this world ruled by the "survival of the fittest," they wanted to be—*needed* to be strong.

"Sir Delfrey! Don't worry about us! Release your power!" a knight shouted.

“I was looking forward to a fight to the death with you. What a pity. Only by defeating the source of her power would I be able to truly declare that I have surpassed Eleanor Daryth. However...”

Delfrey steadied his breath. The Royal Knights were inching closer to the embrace of death, and the odds were stacked overwhelmingly against them. A single second wasted could send the Royal Knights to their doom. What could he do to avoid such a fate?

“Delfrey, the stench of death is wafting from your body. I cannot believe that the famed Guardian Knight is actually preparing for his own death.”

It took less than one second for Delfrey to destroy the thousands of magically manifested threats floating in the air. In that moment, all he could think about were the countless regrets he had. No sooner had he done that, though, than the witch summoned another wave of magic just as deadly as the last.

I'm sorry, Eleanor. I can go no further. Surrounded by over two thousand spears of ice, the Guardian Knight knew he struggled in vain.

“What a shame. I wish I had the opportunity to see you with your real abilities. Am I privileged to think that way as the victor of this conflict, Moonlit Guardian Knight?”

Princess Carina needed the Royal Knights to survive for when she took over the throne. They were indispensable. Furthermore, he had been able to find several promising seeds at Kirsch with the potential to become knight candidates.

But the one thing I regret most...is that I really wanted to be there to witness a future where you and Carina could proceed hand in hand, Delfrey thought wistfully.

“Eleanor, meeting you...” *...gave me the happiest days of my life.*

His icy face seemed to melt as the strongest knight thought back to the days gone by. “Thank you...for choosing someone like me.”

With that silent confession whispered to deaf ears, a memory floated to the surface of Delfrey’s mind. He remembered the agreement he had made with the Great Spirit of Darkness before they had come to this land.

Nobody knew about the fact that the Great Spirit of Darkness had approached the Guardian Knight in secret. Back then, with the worst possible outcome in mind, the Guardian Knight hadn’t faltered at all before he bowed his head to his enemy.

“Great Spirit of Darkness!” he hollered. “I admit my defeat!”

And thus, Rudolf Delfrey came to a decision—for the sake of Eleanor and Carina, he would personally discard a lifetime of loyalty and beg aid from the Great Spirit of Darkness.

Such a scene would stun beyond a stupor those who knew of his

abilities. Who would have thought that the famed Guardian Knight, Rudolf Delfrey, the man upon whom Lectrikuhl had bestowed that prestigious title, would implore mercy from someone else? They would surely pinch their own cheeks. Surely this was all a wild dream.

“Just like I promised, I will give you the Guardian Sword and my power! In exchange, hand over yours, *right now!*”

However, had they known just who Delfrey was begging aid from, they’d have understood. The Great Spirit of Darkness was, after all, a devil who could read one’s weakness and dissect it to mold a future she wanted.

“I ask...that you protect all the knights here!”

The Great Spirit of Darkness, who had been watching like a hawk, rose from her seat in the special spectator area. At last, she thought, the opportunity she’d long waited for—the chance to claim the Guardian Sword—had finally arrived.

And then...

...she froze. “What...is *that?*”

The Great Spirit of Darkness had been distracted. She had known that the Guardian Knight was fighting at a disadvantage, and her thoughts lingered on the treasure she would soon gain. *After I get my hands on that Guardian Sword, I should seclude myself in my stronghold for three whole days and nights. I’ll be able to analyze Lectrikuhl’s power! I can’t wait to see the look on that Great Spirit’s face when that happens,* she’d fantasized.

So wrapped up in her imminent gain, she’d failed to notice what had happened. She had never, in her wildest imaginations, thought there was someone powerful enough to interfere with this fight other than herself. It was for this reason that she hadn’t foreseen the interruption.

A youth’s voice echoed out. “So you’re after the Guardian Sword, huh? I should’ve guessed as much, Great Spirit of Darkness.”

Thus, the Great Spirit’s eyes snapped to the other end of the arena.

“It’s not your place to butt in,” the voice continued. “This is still a battle between humans...*our* battle.”

Her gaze slid past the fighters in the center of the arena and landed on the youth in the spectator seats on the opposite side. This third party, who had accumulated power while biding his time, swung down his wand like an announcement dictating that the time was nigh. A three-dimensional arcane circle the color of molten gold appeared high, high in the heavens, expanding as if from nothing.

“Tumble the skies, Hurricane.”

The Guardian Knight stabbed his sword into the ground and

braced himself against the howling gales that burst forth without warning. An impact that shook the entire arena forced even the witch to go on the defensive. This spell was the signature move that had earned a young boy from the days gone by the name of the “Prodigy of Wind”—a miniature hurricane of sacred force manifested to purify everything in its wake, including the poison that drenched the ground.

Within the blinding, torrential winds, a figure appeared beside the Guardian Knight. “Sir Delfrey. I believe this is the first time that I have seen a humanlike expression on your face.”

And the Guardian Knight recognized who it was.

The youth continued. “With this, I’ve cleansed the main culprit eating away at the Royal Knights. Please heal their maladies with the power of the Guardian Sword. Knowing your abilities, I am sure you can.”

“...I owe you one.”

Then, from inside the roaring winds, a silhouette emerged, just a little shorter than the Guardian Knight.

The woman’s tone was cold. “Why did you come out? If you had stayed behind the barrier, you would have at least guaranteed your own safety.”

The witch’s alert levels rose to a peak. After all, this new contender didn’t stop at completely eliminating the poison gnawing at the Royal Knights with his spell. The second problem was that he had somehow managed to destroy a barrier which Lectrikuhl had a hand in creating in order to make his appearance.

“I don’t think you’d understand even if I explain it to you, but I want to see what happens in the next phase of the dream, you see. And that’s why—”

Indeed. He had broken through the impenetrable fortress that even a musketeer of Dustour, the witch of the north, had considered indestructible.

“—Dream Dealer Witch, let’s move on to our rematch...to the climax of this battle!”



Eleanor Daryth abandoned all efforts to comprehend the situation. She could only watch on in a daze.

Perhaps that was inaccurate. It wouldn’t be an overstatement to say that *nobody* present was able to fully keep up with the current turn of events. Even the knights, who had regained enough vigor to get on their feet thanks to the Guardian Knight’s magic, couldn’t believe what they were witnessing. Even these brave, veteran heroes, the pride of Daryth, doubted their own eyes, just like Eleanor Daryth. In fact, because of their closer proximity compared to the queen, they

were aware of just how ridiculous the youth's actions were.

The Great Spirit of Darkness raised an eyebrow. "Eleanor, you look like you saw a ghost. Why are you so incredulous?"

"I never realized he was that strong..."

A mere student was overpowering a mage who had pulled the wool over the eyes of the Order of Royal Knights. Each and every one of the witch's spells could kill him in an instant if they landed a hit. Now, that *student* defended himself perfectly against these countless fatal blows, and he was counterattacking!

Up until now, against the Royal Knights, and against the Guardian Knight, the witch had always been in control. But looking at her now, she was forced completely on the defensive.

"He was willing to challenge Fran to a pure magic duel..." The Great Spirit of Darkness shook her head. "Even in the north, I could count on one hand the number of people who dare do that."

The Royal Knights had made the most appropriate choice possible when they had tried to fight the musketeer in close-quarters combat. The witch was a master at mid- and long-range magic, and it was reckless in the supreme to fight her on her home playing field.

Right now, however, not only had someone dared to defy the witch head-on, he *was succeeding* at it.

The Great Spirit of Darkness had originally thought that the Guardian Knight was the only human in the Country of Knights who could handle a one-on-one fight with the witch. But right below her, one of her subordinates—one whom she had absolute confidence in, mind you—was fighting with a student who kept on even footing with her. No, the student even had the *upper hand*.



“From what I’ve heard...he lost once to the witch. Lectrikuhl said that his power was far inferior to Rudolf’s, as well. He may be a wandless mage, but this makes no sense...!”

“Nuh-uh. Nothing is nonsensical at all, Eleanor. Search your memories. Didn’t your strongest knight gain his strength like that too?”

Memories of the days she had spent traveling with her knight surfaced in her mind. The Great Spirit was right—Rudolf had been mediocre at first. It was supposedly a miracle the man had been knighted at all, and at the time Eleanor had wished to whip his pathetic disposition into shape. That, and she had also wanted to know about the outside world. Accordingly, Eleanor had purposely placed her life in danger many times. She had charged into fights that they shouldn’t have had any chance of winning, be it against monsters or men.

Alone with her knight, she had repeatedly forced herself into desperate corners, putting their lives on the line, and they had only grown strong because of this process.

“But that was pretty close. The Guardian Knight turned his back on his loyalty towards you, and he was just moments from losing the divine protection of Lectrikuhl. You’d better thank that child. Eleanor, your knight was on the brink of toppling down from the throne of the strongest... Aaand she isn’t listening to me at all. Great. Well, I get her though. Seeing this as a mage would be rather...”

Eleanor couldn’t take her eyes off the clash between the two for even a second. As a mage, this moment was more precious than anyone could ever imagine. Eleanor Daryth, who had forgotten all ways of fighting other than risk-free battles somewhere down the line, faced the risk of dying for the first time in a long time.

The way the youth fought was so tactless, so sincere, so straightforward that it tugged at her heartstrings. Even shame nipped away at her heart as she suspected that she might have forgotten how to fight at all.

“He has always been well liked by spirits, but phew, that’s going above and beyond my expectations. He’s facing *Fran*, of all people, but he looks as if he doesn’t doubt his victory even for one second... What can I say? I’m impressed.”

The Great Spirit of Darkness could see the blessing of the spirits. Slowe Denning must have achieved something spectacular. Normally, this was impossible.

He must have overthrown a future that only the spirits could bring to fruition.

“You should be proud,” the Great Spirit of Darkness said slowly.

“Look! A man of that caliber is actually hesitating to interfere with this battle!”

The Great Spirit saw the Guardian Knight, who was standing to one side after he had successfully saved all the Royal Knights. A mix of chagrin and bitterness tainted his expression. Yet, the Guardian Knight did not make a move.

“...Extraordinary,” Delfrey whispered.



“Oink oink *oiink!*”

The witch looked at me as if I was the eeriest creature she had ever seen. “How could you cast such spells while letting out a disgusting laugh like this?!”

I didn’t care, though. I couldn’t help the internal tears of joy. *Moments before the Guardian Knight made the decision to sell his soul to the Great Spirit of Darkness, he whispered a sentence... I was the only one who overheard it, but that! That’s gotta mean exactly what I think it means, right?!*

The witch gritted her teeth. “If this hadn’t been a consecutive battle...!”

“Let me tell you something! That’s called an ‘excuse,’ did you know that?!”

I wasn’t the only one. I wasn’t the only one! That Guardian Knight was the exact same!

The knight hailed as the “strongest” man in this country turned out to be no different than me—or at least, how I was before. I’m going to cry. I swear I’m gonna cry. I could read that man’s heart like the back of my hand. He swore his loyalty to the queen, was by her side for the longest time, and...held an unrequited love towards her.

I mean, I honestly question his taste, because why in the world would you fall in love with that terrifying queen? Oh, well. Everyone is different. And this great pioneer of mine...laid his heart bare at the very last moment.

“How could you be such a no-name despite having such abilities?!”

“I do have a name, and a pretty famous one, at that! I’m called the Piggy Duke! Ah, that’s not right! Don’t they call me a cyclops or something nowadays? Well, I have a habit of overdoing it sometimes, you see!” I yelled with effort in the midst of our battle.

I’m sorry, Mister Torchbearer Delfrey, but right now, I’ve never been happier in my life. Confessing my own feelings is a scary thing. It might be one-sided and fall flat. I wish it was as easy to understand as magic, but, well, this is one topic that we can’t be too greedy about.

I grinned. “I’ve never been giddier in my whole life...and I don’t feel like I’ll lose at all!”

If I have to be picky about one thing, though, I would have preferred that I confessed first. I mean, the earlier we got over that hurdle, the more lovey-dovey time we'd have, right?

"Slowe Denning! I *did* investigate you!"

"Oh really?! Well, what did you think?! I would love to hear the opinion of the oh-so legendary mage!"

An onslaught of lightning attacked me relentlessly from above. Bolts of lightning, incessant like rain, pierced the ground as they swerved away from me. However, I held not a shred of fear in my heart. It reminded me that I was standing right at death's door. One mistake could mean my death; I knew that. One wrong move could throw my vision into an endless night.

But what a shame for you, witch, because I've already pieced together the formula for victory. I'd finally had a taste of the fruits of my training; I had more than enough energy left to keep my mind whirling.

"I must say, it was atrocious! You're a brat who turned into a coward because you let your parentage and talent spoil you silly!"

"Yeah, you're right! I won't deny that! I can't!"

With a jerk, my body became heavy. *The witch's arm enclosed in that black mist... She probably activated a darkness spell.*

Unpleasant memories surfaced in my mind. A future where I lost everything. My consciousness became hazy. I could hear someone shouting.

If this had been a little while ago, I might have lost my nerve and stopped moving, but I was fine now. I had overcome all of the past events that she made me watch. This kind of thing didn't even count as an obstacle.

If I didn't have such a past, I wouldn't be here. If I didn't have such a past, I wouldn't have been able to accept my pathetic side.

If I didn't have such a past, I would have never even been able to tell her that I like her.

There was a ghostly whisper. "No...way..."

While my mind flashed back to the past fondly, the hail of attacks had stopped sometime along the way. On reflex, I stopped in my tracks and saw that the witch ahead of me was staring at something behind me in shock.

"This... This isn't fair..." she muttered.

However, I was immediately able to deduce what caused the witch to be uneasy. I was only looking at the witch in front of me, so I didn't know what was happening in her line of sight, but...

The sky was startlingly bright, and the speechless witch also tilted her head to look upwards. There was no need for me to look and see what she saw.

This was a precursor to the Guardian Knight Delfrey arriving at his full power.

I turned to the witch. "Francisca, surrender. At this rate, you'll—"

"I give you my thanks, Slowe Denning. The knights have completed their withdrawal."

The man had healed the knights enough to aid them in their retreat from the battlefield in a very short amount of time, which went completely beyond my expectations. *But...that's the power of the strongest man of Daryth, whom even Eldred had qualms about facing in the anime.*

The moonlight that adorned the night sky was the very embodiment of Sir Delfrey's true abilities when he unleashed them.

"I shall take over from here."

"Sir Delfrey!" I shouted in a panic. "That woman no longer has the will to fight, and—"

"You have only three seconds. Back off before then."

However, seeing the witch slumped over in resignation before us, I bit my lip hard.

"Three."

Everything that followed played out in slow motion.

The witch looked as if she was at a loss for words, as if she had given up on her own life. The zest she had shown when she had crushed the Order beneath her feet was nowhere to be found, and...

"Two."

Sir Delfrey, it might be a good idea to reassess this situation. This woman has already admitted defeat after seeing your all-out strength. In that case, we must end the fight here. Unless the witch returns to the empire unharmed, this lady's followers will—

"One."

My eyes were locked with the witch's. Then, that woman shook her head.

No. I can't let this happen. Yeah, you're my enemy. You're a clear threat.

"Waver, Moon—"

But if we kill you, a new war will begin, so I...

I took in a sharp breath and braced myself.

To be honest, I didn't really remember what happened afterwards. *You can't blame me—my vision turned pure white, and I had absolutely no clue what was going on.*

But the only thing on my mind was a desperate effort to fend off the Guardian Knight's power. I couldn't remember anything, but that was one fact I was sure of.

All things considered, I really want to praise myself. I managed to

ward off a serious, full-on attack able to reach the very ends of the heavens by the Moonlit Knight! The full force of the attack reduced a section of the spectator seats to rubble. Naught but a crater that stretched all the way out into the forest remained in the place where those seats used to be.

“Slowe Denning... What the hell do you think you are doing?!” Sir Delfrey roared.

I could see dozens of Royal Knights behind Sir Delfrey, who gripped the shining Guardian Sword tightly. Among them were Sir Dalton, and Shuya’s master as well. All of them were battered from head to toe, but still burned with determination to fight.

“The battle is already over. This woman no longer wishes to fight back,” I said slowly.

The witch behind me, who was unable to stand back up from her shaken state, was raising her two hands pitifully. This was a sign of surrender. *Looks like she couldn’t help but admit defeat after seeing the Guardian Knight unfettered.*

Immediately after her battle with the Royal Knights, she had needed to face the Guardian Knight. Then, she had needed to tackle me with all my vigor and energy. Now, she looked as if she’d been through the wringer. I’d even go so far as to say that she had been fighting on sheer willpower alone.

“Have you gone mad? How could you risk your life to protect the enemy...? It cannot be, has she turned you into her puppet—”

“I am here of my own free will, but... Convincing you in such a situation seems pretty impossible, from the looks of things.”

Even in their wildest dreams, I was willing to bet that nobody imagined that *I* would protect the witch. I could tell that the witch behind me seemed startled too. *But you know what? I’m actually more surprised than anyone else here, to be honest.*

“The only measure we can rely on to judge whether one is under the witch’s control is their actions,” the Guardian Knight said sternly. “Slowe Denning, while it is true that I owe you a debt I cannot ever repay in my lifetime, if you do not step aside, *I will* cut you down.”

“I’m pretty confused myself. Why would I protect someone like this...? I can’t say. But I *can* say that we would go down a horrible path if we killed her.”

After imagining what would happen after her death, I had been so distraught by the thought of it that my body had moved before my mind could catch up. To be specific, it was the thought of the witch’s hundreds of thousands of devotees stopping at nothing until they had their revenge that spurred me on.

Francisca, the best healer in the entire world, had cured countless people along the way, from the lowliest of slaves in the north to the

highest kings of nations. There were more than plenty of people in this world willing to sacrifice their lives for her. I had wanted to avoid Daryth becoming the target of the hatred of her dangerous followers—no, dangerous didn't even begin to describe them.

But from the looks of this...the Royal Knights probably wouldn't let this golden opportunity slip by.

I calculated every possibility I could, but... *No matter how much I struggle, I can't see a path that would save her—*

A voice cut into our conversation. "Stop right there."

Or at least, that was what I thought, but it looks like I forgot someone. The strongest being around isn't Sir Delfrey.

Once again, the atmosphere tensed up. The Great Spirit walked slowly, approaching us step by step. Letting her clothes flutter delicately in the air, she wedged herself between us and let out a big sigh.

Looking my way, the Great Spirit of Darkness said, "You *really* know how to surprise me, don't you...?" Her lips curled into a smile.

Against her, it seemed that even Sir Delfrey was wary, stiffening as she approached.

"I know you lot can't forgive Fran," she began. "I know that even killing her a hundred times wouldn't satisfy the grudge you hold against her. There's one issue, though. She might not look like it, but she still is pretty important in the north. A large part of the population adores her, and if she dies, her many followers won't take that lying down. Basically, she's a pawn that I also don't really want to lose."

"Great Spirit of Darkness, we have no interest in your opinion," the Guardian Knight stated coldly. "This is a fight between us and the woman over there. If we do not eliminate her, all the souls lost at the palace would be for naught. There is no world where we could show her mercy."

The Great Spirit raised an eyebrow. "Oh, my... Big words coming from someone who begged me for help not long ago, hm?"

The Guardian Sword was still emitting a sharp, silver light. The gazes of the Royal Knights were tinged with bloodlust and were cutting like daggers polished to the extreme.

However, even in this atmosphere, the cool, clear eyes of the Great Spirit of Darkness did not change. She looked as if nothing could faze her, and that was likely because...

Because even in this place filled with the lineup of the strongest warriors of Daryth, she has absolute confidence in her own abilities.

After a pause, she let out a big sigh. "Looks like you guys won't back off unless I take drastic measures."

The point of the Guardian Knight's sword reflected the glow of the crescent moon hanging in the sky. If this man who possessed the

national treasure of Daryth—this man who was able to shatter the witch’s confidence into pieces—switched over to serious mode, even I wouldn’t be able to put up a fight.

I know it’s really late for this question, but why in the world did I ever do that?! Predicting a future where my head would fall from my shoulders with a single strike, a chill went down my spine.

The Guardian Knight was a worrywart who held the queen in the softest, most sacred corner of his heart. If possible, he probably wanted to obliterate the witch as quickly as he could in order to protect that which he treasured most.

But the Great Spirit of Darkness didn’t even show a lick of anxiety. “However, Guardian Knight, I know your weakness through and through... Right, Eleanor?”

Then, turning to our queen, who at some point had made her way to the battlefield and through the Royal Knights, she announced this. “Ask these bloodthirsty guys to back off. In exchange...”

In another world, *Shuya Marionette*, there had been a wish of the south that they would have sacrificed anything to fulfill. A wish that even Shuya and Alicia hadn’t been able to realize.

“I’ll throw away my dream of uniting the continent as one forever—I’ll admit my defeat. Surely you would have no complaints then, right?”

And now, the big bad boss of the Dustour Empire just granted it in one sentence, speaking with an assertive attitude that made her sound like the winner instead.

Final Chapter: The Next Phase of the Dream

I lost the match, but won the war. I think it wouldn't be a stretch to conclude that about that battle at the forest arena.

"It's well into autumn now..." I muttered.

The sky was crystal clear with not a cloud in sight, and in the middle of it, the sun cast a brilliant light onto the land. The leaves of the trees swayed with a rustle. It was so quiet and peaceful that I could even sense the gentlest breeze, and basking in this moment, I walked in silence.

"But wow, who would have thought that I'd ever get the opportunity for spirits to show me the way inside a *Sanctuary*? It probably wouldn't have been possible with the Great Spirit of Wind."

Right now, led by spirits, I was walking inside the *Sanctuary* erected inside the forest. *Still...* I stifled a sigh. *There should be a limit to how much someone can hermit themselves away! Are you listening, Mr. Big-Shot-of-the-Country?*

Apparently, someone who wanted to talk to me awaited my arrival at the end of this path. After Princess Carina had finished the Prayer Ceremony—or at least, that's what we announced to the public—the queen and the Royal Knights had left to return to the capital. Then, mysterious light spirits with the ability to speak the human language had come up to me, and they had guided me here. If I continued down this path, I would arrive at a very familiar area: my gym.

Actually, the Great Spirit of Wind had even tagged along until halfway, perhaps because talking spirits were novel to them as well, but the moment they realized who exactly was waiting for us...

"*I'll go protect Charlotte, meow...*" they had said slowly before disappearing off somewhere. *That guy's absolutely heartless.*

"Hey there. I've been waiting for you."

I spotted the person in question sitting on the very top of a pile of pipes, almost as if that place were a special seat reserved for him. But this young boy had a sort of unfathomable air to him that made it seem like that was actually the case.

After a moment of silence, the boy said, "Huh. You're not surprised."

"I'm aware that this is but a wistful dream of an early afternoon,

after all.”

“Boring.” He sighed. “You’ve seen through my identity, and you also know that I’m an illusion. But even if I appear as an illusion, I can count the people who can face me without apprehension on one hand.”

He was exactly who I’d expected: the Great Spirit of Light, Lectrikuhl. He was a child who had an otherworldly, ethereal feel to him. People would get the impression that he was an esteemed young lord of a noble house, but I wouldn’t be deceived by the smile on his face. This boy was the same as all the other Great Spirits: a monster beyond human comprehension.

“Prized child of House Denning, I can tell that you’re thinking something rather unpleasant. At the very least, I’m sure that I’m more respectable than the Great Spirit in the north, Nanatrij. Ah, how about I put it this way? I think I’m more reasonable by far, compared to that creature who seems to be rather attached to you. To think that you were able to tame Altanger... You amaze me.”

“And...what does Lord Lectrikuhl want from me, I wonder?” I asked slowly.

“Well...considering what I know about you, you probably know why I called you here, don’t you?”

“Imagination knows no bounds. Unless I hear verbal confirmation, I’m pretty clueless.”

“You have a point there. If so, shall we cut to the chase, just as you wish?”

What does he want? This guy nearly never shows himself to others. Even though I’m a direct descendant of House Denning, this is the first time I’ve seen him other than his appearances in the anime.

He continued. “Firstly, I should thank you.”

“Thank me, you say?”

“Yes. You were able to fish out an oath of peace from the Great Spirit of Darkness herself. Do you not realize how great of an accomplishment that is? You probably don’t. Your kind can’t even live to see a hundred years, after all.”

I closed my mouth, looking at him in silence.

“Choosing to capture the witch alive and use her as a bargaining chip with the Great Spirit of Darkness was the best move. I mean, it was pretty clear that the Great Spirit of Darkness wanted to bring that woman back to the north. But it was just as clear that Eleanor had no plans of capturing that woman alive. That child is quite headstrong, so she probably thought that the witch might come back to take revenge if she spared her life, or something along those lines. Hm...? What’s wrong? It feels like I’m doing all the speaking. We can’t call this a conversation. I came here today to talk to you, not talk at you.”

“Then, Lord Lectrikuhl... May I ask one question?”

Without thinking, I spoke to him in a humble and respectful tone. He may seem many years younger than me in appearance, but there was nothing to be ashamed about. This boy held an amount of power that was worthy of my deference.

“Please, feel free to ask me as many questions as you wish. You see, I’m in a wonderful mood right now, almost as if I’m in a dream.”

“Did you know that Her Majesty would lose from the very beginning?”

Hearing my question, Lord Lectrikuhl looked at me in puzzlement. His expression practically said that he thought my question was the epitome of foolishness.

“Isn’t that obvious?”

“It...is?”

“The witch of Dustour was able to break through my *Sanctuary* inside Daryth City. Eleanor was too naive thinking that she could take such a mage down without the Guardian Knight. However, that’s what makes Eleanor, Eleanor. All the way up to this point, that child has grasped victory in such a way.”

I frowned. “She was one step away from defeat this time.”

“But if we just look at the results, Eleanor was able to win against the witch by using you, right? She is that kind of woman.”

I had acted for my own sake. I hadn’t had any thoughts about taking the queen’s side at the time.

“I must say, however, that I was very surprised. The Great Spirit of Darkness admitted her defeat and voluntarily proposed a compromise! It’s truly a rare occurrence, do you know that? The Great Spirit of Darkness, that monster who would even call me a brat, actually took the initiative to do such a thing!”

Lectrikuhl, who radiated happiness from head to toe, looked innocent, as if nothing in the world had ever tainted him. “Who would have thought that she’d be willing to agree to my binding oath spell?! Outrageous!”

The oath of peace... After that battle, the Great Spirit of Darkness had apparently agreed to bind herself with an oath spell in the capital, where Lectrikuhl had then cast it. Fast-forward to the present, and the Great Spirit of Darkness had long departed for the north alongside the wounded witch.

“However, Slowe Denning, that isn’t the only thing I wish to thank you for. The witch incident happened to have all the requirements needed for Eleanor and Carina to make peace with each other. Both of them are rather headstrong and stubborn, you see. This time, they were both forced into a perilous predicament, and I had thought that it might provide a good opportunity for them to both reassess each

other with fresh eyes. I even thought that losing the Guardian Sword to the Great Spirit of Darkness would be worth it, if it could possibly bring about that reconciliation. That was why I told the Guardian Knight beforehand that in the worst-case scenario, it was acceptable for him to give in to that Great Spirit's temptation. I knew that girl had her eyes set on the Guardian Sword, after all."

I see. So basically, this means that...he had us in the palm of his hand every step of the way.

"That's why I'm very thankful to you. Thanks to you, Eleanor was able to achieve her goal as well, and Carina will likely gain much strength of heart after that experience. And I, too, was a winner, for I was able to drag out the words I wanted to hear from that girl."

I almost slumped over limply. *I wanted to stay away from the queen, but I want to get away from Lectrikuhl even more.*

"So, with that out of the way... Say, if I told you that I will grant you whatever wishes you desire...what would you do?"

Because even at this very moment, he is testing me.

In a daze, I felt the autumn wind brush against me while the school assembly went on in the background.

The world was sprinting straight towards a peaceful future. I no longer needed to make any detours. I didn't have to worry about anything anymore.

Thus, I attended this assembly with my mind somewhere in the clouds as I listened absentmindedly to the headmaster talk.

In this abrupt school assembly, the headmaster was reading words of gratitude from the queen and her ensemble, who had already left Kirsch. The message talked about how they had been able to see many future knights in the making, and how they were thankful for that.

After that, the inconsequential stuff went on and on and on. Right now, it seemed that there was an announcement about the changes in our curriculum. Apparently, they would grant more freedom to students when we choose our classes so that they could answer to the needs of each unique individual better. They then said they might hire several new professors, and I guessed that it might be because of the earlier announcement.

"An unusual time of year...new teachers...and now, I shall introduce our transfer student...we shall start with the teachers..."

I say that, but well, to be frank, I'm hearing very little of what the teachers are saying. My mind is somewhere else. I probably look as if my soul has left my body or something.

The world has truly become peaceful with no lingering doubt. The reason is, of course, the fact that the Great Spirit of Darkness is utterly unable to meddle with the south now, just like Lectrikuhl told me before.

“...might recognize her...Professor...rle...”

Huh. Everyone's smiling for some reason. Did a big name come to Kirsch from the capital as our professor or something? Anyway, the headmaster read out the queen's message earlier, but as a matter of fact, the queen invited me to go to the capital. She said that she can't make this incident public and give me official recognition, but she wanted to welcome me with hospitality there and repay me that way, at least. I rejected her politely, saying that I was busy with schooling. Of course, Charlotte's case was settled and buried as a secret.

“...not fear...the genuine one this time...”

That aside, huh. It's been a while since I've attended an assembly.

Shuya was at a spot diagonally in front of me. Hm. This guy's been turning his head around for a while and muttering something. What's he doing?

For a moment, I was clueless, but I soon figured it out. Oh, he's talking to me.

“He...advice on matters such as future prospects to more lighthearted consultations about everyday happenings. He has a rather unique career, and...historically...professors...from this specific family...unprecedented...”

“Denning... Hey, isn't that professor your—”

“Shuya,” I muttered at length. “We have to be quiet right now.”

Jeez, this guy is such a bad student. Still, Shuya, huh? I probably won't feel any animosity towards him from here on out. Up until a little while ago, I still held a tiny bit of a grudge whenever I thought about him. But now, I don't have to worry even a millimeter about him taking Charlotte away from me, so no hard feelings there.

“Ugh, listen, I'm trying to...you two acquaintances? Earlier, didn't the headmaster...from House...”

What is it? What's this fuss about the new professor? Well, we didn't get a new professor every day, so I decided I'd take this opportunity to take a look at them, but... Uh, the guy in front of me is really tall. Hey, I can't see the professor with you blocking me!

“Moving on... I am sure everyone has heard about him in gossip. I would like to introduce a new exchange student from a foreign land,” the headmaster announced.

Gossip? Ugh, that again? Wait, he just said that everyone knows about it. I let out an internal sigh. Yeah, yeah, this again. I'm the one left out. I haven't heard anything about a sudden transfer student! I keep telling everyone to stop leaving me out of the loop, but see what happened? Sheesh.

“Allow me to introduce him. He is—”

A voice interrupted the headmaster. “Archmage, there is no need for that.”

The owner of the voice appeared brazenly, and seeing him, I blinked. Actually, I wasn't the only one who reacted with a degree of disbelief. *Everyone* present was rendered speechless the moment they laid their eyes upon him.

The slightest tone of amusement wormed itself into his voice. "That is, I can do my own introduction, you see."

He had a tanned complexion—a rare sight in the south—and a gorgeous face to boot. He had a snakelike mark tattooed on his cheek, and his black cape fluttered as he moved.

It wasn't his appearance that surprised me, though. *I mean, even at Kirsch, there are a bunch of people who charm people with their looks. Say, Shuya, for example.*

"As one would expect, I would be a heretic in this country. But then again, the feeling is mutual. To me, the likes of you are all savages."

He treated us like barbarians, but his demeanor was dignified and lacking any sort of shame. His regal, imposing eyes were like crystallized crimson lotuses, glimmering with a light that captivated anyone who happened to catch sight of them.

"Savages passing themselves off as knights... Laughable, indeed. However... I have been anticipating this day for a long time."

There was a liveliness tucked away inside this man, and he had a glamorous aura that made him stick out from the rest of the crowd, permanently stealing the attention of everyone near him.

"Now then, I shall start by giving you my name..."

There was a country further from us than its physical distance. Steep chasms, crooked forests, and a mountain range of everlasting blizzards were obstacles one had to overcome before they arrived in the area where that country ruled supreme. A major nation that relied on—and was famous for—their devastating army as they conquered country after country in a series of wars that seemed to last an eternity.

Yes. They were the superpower that took pride in having the greatest military force on the entire continent. The country that gained control of the numerous great powers of the north with sheer might.

"My name is Neon."

I was completely entranced, almost as if he had my heart in a tight grip. Even Shuya's protagonist aura couldn't hold a candle in comparison. No, comparing the two was like comparing apples to diamonds.

Even as someone with knowledge of the anime, I had only heard about this man in rumors. He was the second in line to the throne, and the leading candidate for the next emperor.

“Neon Rasparl Gilde Dustour, and I have come to this institution to seek out kindred spirits as friends.”

He was the master of the branch of magic that dealt with instant death; a man called Thanatos, the God of Death, in the Dustour Empire.



Together with the entrance of this new character, I cursed the deities above.

Because it seemed that I would have to hold off...on my after-school date with Charlotte.

Afterword

I'm here at a hair salon. I have a hard time deciding what I want to write in the afterword every single time I write one, so this volume, I'd like to make use of the time needed to cut my hair to quickly whip it up.

My haircut probably won't take more than twenty minutes since my hair isn't that long. I told the hairdresser beforehand that I'm the type who prefers to fiddle with my phone during my haircut, so our conversation is kept at a minimum. I have the perfect setup for me to focus on writing my afterword. From experience, unless I tell myself that I need to finish it within a time limit, it would keep dragging on once I start having doubts, so I made a point to finish it all within this time frame.

Anyway, let's talk about hair salons nowadays. It's a wonderful era now... There's the option to borrow smart tablets, and one can surf the internet as much as they want!

...Ahem. This isn't the time to be looking at Yahoo! News. I should concentrate on the afterword now.

In this volume, Slowe finally confessed. Has it been a long wait, or has it been a flash? I think there might be some people who think, "Hey, that was way too sudden!"

Having the knowledge of the anime meant that very little things could throw Slowe for a loop, for better or worse. Perhaps this is Charlotte's counterattack after all the trouble Slowe caused her.

Now then, a new year has come around, and it's 2019. Next year Japan will be hosting the Olympics, and as someone lurking in the metropolitan area, I'm filled with anxiety about the transportation infrastructure when that time comes. But I hope to continue leading a healthy life from now on as well.

I would like to give a huge thanks to all the people associated with the publishing of *Piggy Duke* volume seven. It wouldn't have been possible without you.

I would be very glad if my readers would pick up volume one of the manga edition too.

Hm... Writing the afterword during a haircut was a good idea. This became a very worthwhile experience, so I might attempt it again sometime if I get the chance.



Eleanor Daryth

Queen of Daryth and
the leader of the Great
Southern Alliance.

Carina Little Daryth

The crown princess of Daryth,
the Country of Knights.
A happy-go-lucky hermit
princess.

Reincarnated as the **Piggy Duke**

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*



“You’ve
become
entirely
independent
nowadays,
and...”

“And
you no
longer
need
someone
useless
like me
around,
do you,
Master
Slowe?!”

Charlotte Lily Huzak
The princess of the once-great
kingdom of Huzak, now
destroyed. Currently Slowe’s
retainer, a far cry from her
former royal position.

“Oi...
Oooooink!”

Slowe Denning
The protagonist who
reincarnated into the world of
his favorite anime. The third
son of House Denning, and a
problem student at Kirsch
Mage Institute. At least, he
used to be...



"A knight
who can't
advise their
lord has
no place at
their side!"

"Rudolf,
I leave the
rest to you."

"A mere
noble dares
to insult me...
You better be
prepared to
pay the price
for your
insolence."

Rudolf Delfrey
The Guardian Knight
to Queen Eleanor, the
youngest queen to ever
ascend the throne.



*"A tiny
problem
like this
won't
faze me
at all!!!!"*

*You see the girl
sleeping there? I managed
to tell her...that I like her.
And yet... I gritted my teeth.
I can't even enjoy the feeling
thanks to these guys.
Besides, compared to all the
hardships I suffered before I
finally made my confession...*

*"You
see, I...
I don't
want...
I never
want
Mother to
lose..."*

Translator's Notes

Welcome back to this latest edition of Weird Trivia. I'm Zihan, the translator for *Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke*! I'd like to share some background about some of the more obscure terms we had to localize, so let's jump right into it!

Prologue: I Always Overdo It

Bellows of agony on one's deathbed

Slowe describes his howls during his training as "bellows of agony that sound like an orc on its deathbed." The term used here is *danmatsuma*, which refers to someone dying an extremely painful or torturous death.

It is originally a Buddhist term that describes how one dies after either severing or touching their *matsuma* the wrong way. *Matsuma* is the Japanese transliterated version of *marman* in Sanskrit, referring to the vulnerable, weak, critical parts of the body—essentially the vital point. It was believed that if someone touched their vital point and severed their *matsuma*, they would die. It was also said that if someone struck their *matsuma*, it would warp their mind into an abnormal state. Thus, the term *danmatsuma* is used to describe the last sounds made by a victim in extreme pain on the brink of their death.

On the topic of transliterated words, there are many common Japanese words that are taken from foreign languages. These loanwords might surprise you! For example, the word *konpeitou*, a type of sugar candy, is taken from the Portuguese word *confeito*. *Ikura*, red caviar, is derived from the word *ikra* in Russian. *Tempura* is said to be derived from either the Portuguese *Têmpora* or the Spanish *Témporas*, referring to the ember days in Christianity, quarterly periods of fasting not unlike the Lent practiced in Catholicism.

Miha

Charlotte's friend, Miha, has a rather interesting name. She is one long vowel mark from the word *miihaa*, a derogatory slang word referring to shallow bandwagon fans (particularly girls) who jump from one trend to another.

The term is the abbreviation of *Mii-chan Haa-chan*, and has its origins in the early Showa period. Back then, many girl names used to

begin with *mi* and *ha* like Miyo-chan or Hana-chan, so the term *Mii-chan Haa-chan* was an umbrella term for young women, used with a disapproving tone (a little like “Youngsters these days...”).

There are a few other origin theories about this term, though. One popular theory says that it originally referred to fans of the popular actor Kazuo Hasegawa, whose stage alias was Chōjirō Hayashi. In those days, young women liked a dessert known as *mitsumame*, which is made of agar jelly cubes and red field peas topped with a sweet black syrup. People then combined the two trending terms, *mitsumame* and fans of Chōjirō Hayashi, into *miihaa* to refer to young women in general.

Theories aside, one funny term related to *miihaa* is the term *sooraa*, referring to people who were more respectable than *miihaa*, though that term died out relatively quickly. *Miihaa* sounds like *mi-fa* in *do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti*, and *so-la* is one step above *mi-fa*, so *sooraa* was used to describe people one step better than the shallow trend addicts.

Chapter 1: Am I a Celebrity Now?

Secrets you don't want others to find out

Professor Loco Moco warns Slowe and mentions that Slowe must have secrets he didn't want exposed. The original term here can be roughly translated as "a stomach you don't want other people to probe into/investigate." Investigating someone's stomach is a term in Japanese describing someone furtively fishing for secrets or information from someone else.

Romance gossip

Slowe thinks about how he hasn't had any juicy romance gossip so far, and the term used here can be roughly translated as "floating topics." The word "float" in Japanese, when used in an abstract sense, refers to something in a chaotic state or without order. Emotionally, it implies a sense of giddiness or thoughtlessness, and by extension, matters to do with love.

Rest easy

Slowe reassures Charlotte by saying that because they had the Great Spirit of Darkness on their side, they could rest easy and let the Great Spirit carry them to victory. The term used here can be literally translated as "as if we boarded a large ship," reassuring someone that there is nothing to worry about because they have a sturdy foundation or ally to fall back on. Compared to smaller vessels, larger ships are more stable at sea with less risk of capsizing. Even if there was a relatively strong wind or some rough waters ahead, one wouldn't feel as anxious if they were on a bigger ship.

Chapter 2: Eleanor Daryth

Have a hand in something

Early in the chapter, a student suspects that the queen had a hand in Slowe's name being missing from the roster of candidates eligible to become Royal Knights. The word used here is *sashigane*, roughly translated as "inserted metal," referring to someone manipulating or causing a certain situation from behind the scenes.

There are two popular origin stories for this term. The first is the *sashigane* used in *kabuki*, a stage tool that manipulates small animal props. The tool itself is a black-painted pole with wires inserted at the end. The second is the *sashigane* used in traditional puppet theater, *Ningyō Jōruri*. In these shows, it refers to the thin rods puppeteers used to manipulate the wrists and fingers of the puppets.

Super generous

One student mentions at one point in the chapter how he thinks the Royal Knights are being super generous for each working one-on-one with the candidates at Kirsch. The term used here is *oobanburumai*, roughly "treating someone to a big feast."

Though there are multiple origin stories of this term, the *ooban* likely originally referred to occasions when the immediate vassals of the shogunate entertained their *shogun* with food and drinks. (The *kanji* in this term is a bit different, though, as it changed over time.) One notable date was New Year's, when these vassals, *gokenin*, would prepare a lavish feast for the *shogun* with countless delicacies. Through these ceremonies, the relationship between lords and vassals would be reaffirmed as they dined at the same table, strengthening their bond as well.

It was said that later in the Edo period, this practice spread to the common folk, and big banquets with numerous participants began to be referred to as *oobanburumai*, especially the ones during New Year's. The word eventually began to broaden in meaning, referring to remarkable generosity in general, whether it be with food or valuables.

At one's wits' end

Slowe thinks that Princess Carina looked like she was at her wits' end when she mouthed "help me" to him. The original term here literally translates to "her *seppa* was stuck."

Seppa are two thin elliptical metal plates fitted on both sides of the Japanese sword guard. When these get jammed, it's impossible to

pull out one's sword from its sheath. If this happened right after someone was driven into a corner, they wouldn't be able to run or defend themselves with a sword, leaving them utterly powerless.

Interlude: The Princess of the White Lily

Catching one off guard

The Royal Knights' sharp gazes caught Charlotte off guard during her conversation with Princess Carina. The term used here, *men kurau*, literally translates into “eating a face,” describing someone bewildered or flustered.

This term is supposedly short for *tochimenbou wo kurau* (“being subject to a *tochimen* rolling pin”). *Tochimen* is a type of noodle made from a mixture of horse chestnut flour, regular flour, and buckwheat flour that had to be kneaded and rolled out. Due to the horse chestnut flour, the kneaded dough hardened more quickly than other types of noodle, which meant that it was a race against the clock to flatten the mixture with a rolling pin. The action was associated with chaos and frenzy, and the expression eventually came to describe people being overwhelmed or startled by some unforeseen event, as if they were forced to roll *tochimen* dough.

This was shortened to *men kurau* (“eating/being subject to noodles”), and since the words for “face” and “noodles” sounded the same, the *kanji* changed to the one for face somewhere along the way, which is why we have “eating a face” now!

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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke: This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her
How I Feel! Volume 7
by Rhythm Aida

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Edited by Ori Starling

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